THE · SIN OF · ALISON DERING

L. G. MOBERLY

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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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The Gentlewoman :—" A very pretty love story developed amidst charming rustic scenes."

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The Daily Graphic :—" The authoress grips the interest from the first chapter, and maintains it right to the end, she tells her tale with sustained dramatic force, and the characterization is good throughout.

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Financial Times :—" This is an extremely well written and interesting story, and ranks well with Miss Moberly's other popular works. The plot is ingeniously carried through and the interest thus aroused is well sustained."

Daily Mail :—" An ingenious and most unusual plot. The reader will wonder and be amazed. 'A Tangled Web' indeed is this story, and the author's ingenuity and intrepidity in developing and working out the mystery calls for recognition at the outset."

Scotsman :—" The story is lively and interesting and displays considerable dramatic force."

Western Daily Press :—" In holding the interest of the reader, Miss Moberly may be congratulated, and still more so on account of her natural, unaffected style, and the manner in which some admirable characters are limned."

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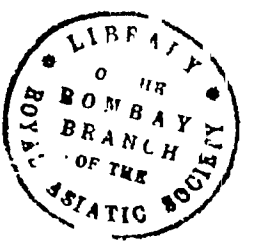
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By

L. G. MOBERLY

Author of "Diana," "A Tangled Web," etc.

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Dedication

TO DEAR LITTLE "MADAM"
WITH LOVE

CONTENTS

CHAP.		PAGE
I	A Sad Home-coming	13
II	"Reg is Waiting!"	27
III	"It is my One Chance"	37
IV	A Letter from Rosamund	62
V	"I must go on now"	70
VI	"Welcome Home!"	81
VII	"The Woman my Boy Loved!"	99
VIII	"Widow indeed!"	109
IX	An Old Friend	123
X	Hubert's Wooing	139
XI	"She is not Rosamund at all!"	157
XII	A Compact	170

CHAP.		PAGE
XIII	"I AM REGINALD METCALFE!" . .	185
XIV	"YOU ARE NOT MY WIFE!" . .	196
XV	"I WISH ROSE WOULD COME HOME!"	206
XVI	WHERE WAS ALISON?	222
XVII	DO THEY STILL BELIEVE IN ME? . .	239
XVIII	"I BELIEVE IT ENTIRELY" . . .	257
XIX	"HE CANNOT HURT ME NOW . .	264
XX	"I—KILLED—HIM!"	278
XXI	"ON ONE CONDITION!" . . .	294
XXII	"PARADISE ITSELF!"	307

CHAPTER I

A SAD HOME-COMING

ALISON DERING stood at the window of the dreariest room in a dreary lodging-house, watching the raindrops chase one another down the panes, and wondering whether the clouds in her own life were more likely to disperse, than the heavy pall of greyness which at this moment covered the sky. Her courage had reached its lowest ebb, for, pluckily as she had fought her way against heavy, sometimes terribly heavy odds, she seemed at last to have entered upon a lane so long, that no turning was within measureable distance.

Upon the table behind her lay her purse, tossed there on her return from a lengthy and fruitless search for employment: and scattered round the purse were the few remaining coins she had in the world: all that still lay between her and the workhouse, or starvation. She turned from the contem-

plation of the wet and dismal world of a small Southampton street, and looked at the pitiful array of coins spread upon the soiled and shabby cloth.

"A shilling, two threepenny bits, and sixpence in coppers," she exclaimed, with a little laugh at the end of the words; "not enough to satisfy Mrs. Jennings, only enough to buy me a few more meals: and after them—the deluge."

She laughed again, a laugh that would have hurt any kindly souled being to hear, but on the top floor of Mrs. Jennings' lodging-house there was no one to hear or to heed anything that Alison Dering did. For the small room, which was the girl's only home, she paid a rent not large in itself, but out of proportion to her small and rapidly diminishing capital; and now that her rent was more than three weeks in arrear, Mrs. Jennings was beginning to look coldly upon her, and to speak with a certain asperity, of whose significance Alison was distractedly conscious.

"She will turn me out after this week," the girl said bitterly, speaking aloud, a habit contracted through long living alone, "and I can't blame her. But what am I going to do? And where can I go, when the time for my eviction comes?"

Her glance left the table and the pathetic row of coins, and turned once more to the grey desolation outside. The rain was coming down in pitiless, straight lines, as it had been doing since the early morning, and not a rift or break was visible in the grey monotony of the sky. The narrow roadway was a river of liquid mud, the water raced along the gutters with the gaiety and inconsequence of a mountain torrent, and the rain drops streamed down the window panes in a deliberate fashion, precluding all idea that this might be a clearing shower.

"If only I had enough money to get myself back to London," Alison exclaimed, pacing the small room with restless, uneven steps, "I should feel there was more chance of getting work, of finding a footing. But here, stranded here in Southampton, where I do not know a living soul, what can I do?"

Moving restlessly about the narrow limits of her room, her mind reverted to the long chain of circumstances which had brought about this present predicament. The sudden death of both her parents many years before, had left her with the very slenderest of capitals at her disposal, and beyond that, nothing to depend upon excepting what her own exertions would bring her. Her capital

she had spent in learning shorthand and typewriting, and for some years she had contrived to maintain herself in London by hard and continuous office and secretarial work. Then she had obtained a post as secretary to a lady who, though a person of some eccentricity, appeared to be generous and kindly; and Alison, at the request of this lady, a certain Miss Vivian, had given up her office work and entered her new employer's house, to perform secretarial and other duties. At first all had promised well. With Miss Vivian she travelled to many provincial towns, her work was congenial, her salary good, and she congratulated herself upon the good fortune of her lot, which seemed to have fallen in such pleasant places. Perhaps because of the height to which her hopes had been raised, her disillusionment, when it came, was all the more bitter. She and Miss Vivian travelled to Southampton together, and took up their quarters in an hotel, ostensibly to await the arrival of a steamer, by which Alison's employer said she was expecting a friend.

Whether this was true or false, the girl never discovered: all she did know, was that one morning she awoke to find her employer had decamped, bag and baggage, leaving a letter for her in which she explained that

urgent private business took her away ; more than half hinting that the private business involved a hurried flight from the police. For what particular infringement of the law Miss Vivian was "wanted," Alison never learnt, nor did she ever again come across that lady. The bank note inclosed in her employer's letter had enabled Alison to pay the hotel expenses, leaving a little margin for herself; and with all the high hopes of youth, she determined not to return to London, but to find work on the spot. Mrs. Jennings' lodgings, if not superlatively comfortable, were cheap, and Alison was sure that work would be forthcoming long before she had exhausted the small amount of money in her possession. But the money had filtered away, the work had not come, until now Alison Dering had reached a point, when she actually and truly did not know which way to turn.

"I haven't a thing more to pawn," she cried, sinking down upon the bed, and staring straight in front of her. "Why I haven't even any dry clothes to change into, though I am wet to the skin. I never knew before what it meant to be wet through, and not to be able to put on dry shoes and a dry skirt." She shivered a little, and dragging a

coloured blanket from the bed, wrapped it round her shoulders with a rueful laugh.

"No wonder the agents look askance at me," she went on soliloquizing, "my poor old black serge is as shabby as can be, my hat has seen quite its very best days, and my shoes let in the wet. I believe that last person I went to thought the relieving officer was the person to whom I ought to apply, not to a decent employment agency. Well! in a few more days it will be the relieving officer, and the workhouse." She rose wearily from the bed, and once again began pacing the room, pausing now and then beside the window, to look out at the still pouring rain.

Few passers-by went along the narrow street in which Mrs. Jennings' house formed one of an ugly row; and on this drenching April afternoon, it was only very occasionally that a man or a woman hurried by under a dripping umbrella. It was therefore with a feeling almost akin to excitement that Alison heard the rumble of wheels, as a vehicle turned into the insignificant street from its furthest end, where it joined a main thoroughfare. What kind of conveyance could it be that was entering their street, on such an afternoon, and at so unusually rapid a pace?

The rumble of wheels drew nearer; a sorry-looking horse came in sight round the bend of the roadway, and it was plain that its driver was urging it to strenuous efforts, for the poor beast was trotting its forlorn best, drawing in its wake a dilapidated looking cab.

"I wonder," Alison began to speculate idly, when, to her no small surprise, the cab drew up with a jerk at Mrs. Jennings' house, and its door was flung open by a man in uniform, whom the watcher from the window had never before seen. Turning to speak to someone left behind in the cab, this man ran up the steps of the lodging-house, and rang so tremendous a peal upon the bell, that Alison's lips curved into a smile, as she reflected on the probable expression of her landlady's face at this imperious summons.

Alison Dering was not by nature a more inquisitive being than the rest of humanity, but she welcomed this distraction from her own depressing thoughts, and the contemplation of the uncompromising rain, remaining rooted to the window, curious to see who and what still remained in the cab, and anxious to observe the result of that furious and resounding peal on Mrs. Jennings' sacred bell.

The first result was the speedy opening of the front door, the second stimulated Alison's curiosity to a most unusual extent, for she saw the uniformed man hurry down the steps again, open the cab door, and lift out—yes, there was no other word for it—lift out a slight figure, so muffled in rugs that nothing more than its dim outlines were discernible. This figure the man carried tenderly and carefully into the house, after which he returned to pay the driver, and to bring in a small trunk, a bag, and a few more impedimenta of travel. Alison lingered at the window until the last package had been brought into the house, until the driver, having lent his aid, had once more taken his place on the box, and driven lumberingly away; then, with a sigh, she turned back to the contemplation of her own depressing room, and the still more depressing condition of her resources, as represented by the collection of coins on the table.

"Perhaps if I make myself some tea, I shall feel less hideously in the dumps," she said to herself, moving over to a small cupboard on the wall, and taking from it a little brown teapot, a cracked milk jug, and the remains of a loaf. "Tea is supposed to be the infallible remedy for every ill a woman

is heir to: and to be hungry, makes one feel as depressed as if one were crossing the Channel." Whilst she murmured these words, she was filling a kettle, and lighting the spirit lamp beneath it, and though she still shivered with cold, even the tiny blue flame of the lamp, and the kettle's gentle singing, seemed to have a cheering effect upon her, for she contrived to smile over her own attempt at lightheartedness. It did not take her long to make the tea, and she was sipping it gratefully, rejoicing over its comforting warmth, when a quick step in the passage was followed by a sharp rap on her door. Alison sighed.

"Mrs. Jennings come to tell me I must pay up, or go," she thought, but she called out, "Come in," with a very successful attempt at cheerfulness, and she looked up bravely at the woman who hurried breathlessly into the room.

"Miss Dering," she gasped, "I've come to ask you to help me. I know you're a kind soul, and goodness knows what I'd best do."

Sheer surprise kept Alison silent for a minute or more. Her last interview with her landlady had been of so markedly unpleasant a description, that it was hard to account for Mrs. Jennings' new tone of de-

ference and supplication. She had more than half expected to receive a summary notice to quit No. 100, Densford Terrace, at once, and she had been nerving herself to face the deadly virulence of Mrs. Jennings' tongue, of which already she had had disagreeable experience. The good woman's entirely new attitude was therefore very disconcerting.

"I'm sure I hope I haven't offended you too much, Miss Dering," Mrs. Jennings began again, when Alison did not speak; "my tongue does carry me away a bit at times, and well I know it. But it's the trying to make two ends meet, and pay my own rent, and get along as best I can, with my husband away and all, that makes me a bit sharp with my tongue. And I'm sure I'm sorry I spoke to you as I did yesterday."

"Never mind about that, Mrs. Jennings," Alison answered gently, seeing that the woman was in genuine distress of some kind: "you want me to help you? What is it? What can I do?"

"It takes a man to go and give you a bad shock, miss, and my husband, he's just come back and given me such a shock as never was."

"Your husband? Was that Mr. Jennings who arrived just now in a cab—with ——"

"Yes, there you are, miss, with a poor young lady, as anybody with one eye in their head, let alone two, could see was dying. He brought her here, and dear knows whatever I'm going to do with her."

Alison tried in vain to follow this tortuous sentence, or to extract sense out of it, and her bewilderment was so plainly marked upon her face, that Mrs. Jennings, in spite of her own perturbation of mind, could not but observe it.

"There, miss, I seem to have told the story all upside down, and wrong foot foremost, but I feel all in a whirl still, and so worried I don't seem to remember my own name, or anything else. Jennings, he's come home a week sooner than I expected him, and though by rights the boat he's on don't carry passengers, they've got a passenger with them this time, and—he's brought her here."

At this point Mrs. Jennings wiped her heated face with a large pocket-handkerchief, looking over its voluminous folds at Alison, with so woe-begone an expression, that the girl felt sorely inclined to smile. Knowing the acuteness of her landlady's susceptibilities, she suppressed the smile, and answered sympathetically—

"But why did he bring her here? Did she want a lodging?"

"Bless you, my dear, she hardly knows what she wants; she's just as ill as ever she can be, and not likely to last much longer, in my opinion. Poor she seems to be, though a real lady, but she came from Africa on a cargo boat to save expense, Jennings tells me, and every day of the voyage she's been getting worse and worse, and weaker and weaker. A widow too," Mrs. Jennings added inconsequently.

"Oh! poor thing," Alison exclaimed; "and all alone? Did no one meet her here? How dreadfully sad!"

"It was because of no one meeting her, that Jennings brought her here," the landlady continued, her tone growing more mollified. "I will say for him, with all his scatter-brained, hasty ways, Jennings is good-hearted. And seeing this poor thing nearly broken down with misery, because there wasn't a soul to welcome her, and she so ill she couldn't hardly stand, he just ups and brings her here, knowing she couldn't ever go to the expense of an hotel. And now——"

The sentence came to a lame conclusion. Mrs. Jennings' eyes scanned her lodger's face with a sudden anxious questioning.

"You want me to do something to help you?" Alison asked, intuitively divining the

woman's meaning. "Of course I will do whatever I can."

"It's this way, miss,"—the landlady spoke with growing embarrassment—"I can't leave the house to look after itself, not entirely, and Emma she's no use in a sick-room, and I daren't leave the poor lady alone for long. She seems too bad for that, and so—I made so bold——"

"Do you want me to come and sit with her? Is that what you were going to ask me?"

"I was going to ask whether—if"—Mrs. Jennings stumbled helplessly over her words, and her glance fixed itself on the pathetic little row of coins on the table—"well, there, Miss Dering, I'll make no bones about it," she exclaimed, with a sudden access of courage, "I was going to ask you if you'd help me look after this poor lady, and then—we'll say nothing more about the bit of rent owing, nor yet about this week's rent either."

The colour ran over Alison's face, her first instinct was to draw herself up, and refuse to sell the services she would willingly have given. But a prudent remembrance of the dire straits of poverty to which she was reduced showed her the folly of repudiating Mrs. Jennings' well-meant offer, and with an

outward meekness she was very far from feeling inwardly, she said quietly—

"Thank you very much. I would anyhow have helped you with this poor lady. But as I have not enough money to pay the rent I owe you, I am very much obliged to you for saying you will not ask me for it. Some day I hope to repay you fully."

When Alison Dering spoke in that self-possessed voice, and held her head at just that particular angle, there was something imperial in her pose, which had a subduing effect upon the souls of such people as Mrs. Jennings, and the landlady looked at her lodger with a new awe in her eyes, and spoke with a new inflection of respect in her voice.

"I'm sure I take it very kind of you to say you'll help me, miss," she said, "and if you wouldn't be offended with me for thinking of it, Emma shall bring up a bit of supper for you to the drawing-room, which opens out of the lady's room—Mrs. Metcalfe her name is, miss—Mrs. Reginald Metcalfe."

CHAPTER II

REG IS WAITING!"

ALISON stood beside the bed in Mrs. Jennings' best bedroom, looking down at its occupant with a great pity in her heart. The face on the pillow was pathetically pinched and small, and its whiteness seemed to make more pronounced the deep lines that sickness, or sorrow, or both, had carved upon its youthful outlines. Mrs. Reginald Metcalfe was very young, pitifully young to be so lonely, so ill, and a widow. That was Alison's first thought, and her heart contracted, as the sick girl's blue eyes met hers with a look of yearning anguish. Round the small white face lay a tumbled mass of golden hair, which gave her an added look of youthfulness, and the hand that lay on the coverlet was so tiny, that its heavy wedding ring seemed to be in imminent danger of slipping from its rightful place, and rolling away altogether.

"I have come to help Mrs. Jennings take care of you," Alison said as if in answer to the question in the other's deep eyes. "I am her lodger, and she told me how lonely you are."

Two tears welled into Mrs. Metcalfe's blue eyes, and slowly crept down her cheeks.

"So—dreadfully—lonely," she whispered. "I came home to Reg's people—and now—I am going to die."

"Oh! but I hope you are going to get better," Alison answered very gently, her hand touching the sick girl's restlessly moving hand. "We must send for a doctor, and nurse you well, and then you will be better."

"It will all be no good," the breathless, whispering voice broke in. "I think people always know when they are really dying, and—I am dying now."

The effort of saying so much, seemed to have exhausted her: her eyes closed, and the hand Alison held dropped nervelessly out of her grasp. She poured out some brandy that stood beside the bed, and, holding the glass to the girl's lips, made her drink a few drops of the restorative. A tinge of colour flickered into the whiteness of the girl's face, and her blue eyes opened again.

"I—don't mind about dying," she said

faintly. "I only want to see Reg again, and he—is waiting for me. But—I should have liked to have seen his father and mother, to tell them everything."

"We will send for them," Alison said quickly. "Will you give me the address? and we will telegraph to them at once."

The golden head on the pillow was slowly shaken.

"It is no use," she answered. "His mother is an invalid: she can't come to me, and I—shall never go to her now—only to Reg—and I must explain to him about it when we meet."

A smile suddenly parted her lips, a flashing radiant smile that all at once gave a strange beauty to the poor little face, and the sick girl's eyes shone with so wonderful a light, that Alison shrank back, with an odd feeling that she had no right to see the look that should only be seen by the Reg of whom Mrs. Metcalfe spoke.

"We ought to send for your people or for your husband's people," Alison spoke again after a short silence; "they would not like to think you are here by yourself, amongst strangers."

"I have no people of my own,"—a little access of strength had come into the weak

voice—she no longer spoke with such breathless difficulty. "I was alone in the world when Reg met me, and married me. He was everything to me—everything: husband, father, mother—all that a woman wants in one. It was so strange, I should like to tell you about it."

The increased strength in the girl's voice, the colour that had come into her face, and the light in her eyes, misled Alison into thinking that perhaps, after all, Mrs. Jennings was mistaken; perhaps this poor little stranger, thus thrown on their care, would recover; and she drew a chair close to the bed, preparing to listen with sympathy to Mrs. Metcalfe's story, determining that as soon as the recital was ended she would insist on sending a telegram to some relation of Mr. Metcalfe, if his widow had none of her own.

"There was never any one like Reg." The sick girl drew herself nearer to the edge of the bed, so that she might see Alison's face more clearly. "He was good to me quite from the very first, when I was just a governess to some horrible Dutch people in Natal. He said he loved me from the very first too. I think he did." A smile again illuminated her face, her eyes grew dreamy, but her voice was still firm, almost strong. "Reg

was going up into Central Africa—he belonged to an exploring expedition—and, because I was so lonely, he took me with him. We were married all in a hurry, when he had known me only three weeks, and I went with him as his wife.—Do you mind my telling you about it?" she asked, with sudden wistfulness. "You are almost the first white woman I have seen, since the day I married Reg, and I seem to want to tell you everything. Do you mind?"

"I like to hear," Alison answered, her hand again closing over the tiny hand that wore the heavy wedding ring. "I like very much to hear, as long as you do not tire yourself." A rift in the clouds outside all at once made the room lighter, and she was startled to see how white the girl's face had again become.

"Why not rest now and tell me some more presently? And, meanwhile, let me send a telegram to your friends. They will be very anxious about you."

"Let them be anxious a little longer," was the reply, and Mrs. Metcalfe's lips closed mutinously. "They knew I should arrive by myself. I telegraphed to them when I left Africa. Why did no one meet me? Reg's father could have come—some one could

have come, when they knew I was alone. No, I will tell my story first: then you can telegraph."

It was the contrariness of a lovely spoilt child, rather than any deeper feeling, and Alison, recognizing this, gave in to the girl's whim—deceived still by the strength of her voice, into believing her to be much less ill than they had at first supposed.

"Nobody ever had a stranger married life, I should think," the girl in the bed went on, dreamily. "It was a long journey after we left the ship—we went miles and miles by the river, and then we went through great forests, where all night the beasts roared round us: and then we came to the loveliest place in the world, and that was our home for three months—Reg's home and mine." After saying this, she was silent for many minutes, a far-away look in her eyes, as though in remembrance she were seeing again the Central African tableland, where she had been so entirely happy. "We lived in tents," she said presently, "and I was the only white woman there. I think I was the happiest woman in all the world—until"—her voice faltered—"until Reg went away."

"Did he have to go away?" Alison put in softly.

"It was necessary that he should go." A certain proud justification of her husband was audible in the girl's tone. "There were very important surveys to be made, and he went away with some of the natives, and I stayed behind, with the two other Europeans to take care of me, and the old negro woman who was my special servant. He—was only to be away a fortnight—but"—again her voice shook pitifully, and Alison once more held the brandy to her lips—"it—was the end," she said abruptly, after another long pause. "His men came back—the natives—some of them came back, and they told us Reg and the rest were killed. They were near a village: the tribe had seemed friendly: no one expected treachery: and then the tribe rose against them—and only a few who came back to us managed to get away. Reg ——."

She gasped painfully for breath, and Alison lifted her a little from the pillow.

"Soon better," she whispered. "It—when I think about it all—it—nearly kills me. We—could not get his body back. We had not enough men to send, and—they made me go away, lest the tribe should follow us and kill us all. I wish they had killed us," she cried with sudden passionate strength,

" then I should have been out there with Reg —not here alone."

A low, pitiful sobbing broke from her, and it was long before Alison could soothe or quiet her, and when she did at last lie back amongst her pillows, she looked so spent and exhausted, that Alison rang the bell in alarm.

" Tell Mrs. Jennings the doctor must come at once," she whispered to Emma, the little servant, who appeared in answer to her ring. " Say Mrs. Metcalfe is worse."

Worse indeed, very much worse, was her reflection, as she shut the door, and returned to the bedside, to note with dismay how terribly white and drawn was the patient's face, how difficult and agonized each breath she drew. Alison thought for a moment that she had sunk into unconsciousness, but her eyes opened again, and she looked up into the elder woman's face.

" I am glad I told you," she said. " He was so dear to me, so good, always so good— 'I, Reginald Michael, take thee, Rosamund,' he said—but he never called me Rosamund —only Rose—his white Rose."

" Dear," Alison bent over her, and spoke very clearly and distinctly, a great fear knocking at her heart, " will you tell me where

I can telegraph for your friends, or for your husband's friends? They ought to know you are—alone."

"I have no friends." The blue eyes looked with a faint amusement into Alison's. "Reg and I often laughed, because I have no friends or relations. I was an orphan—all alone—before I was his wife. Now——"

"And your husband's relations, dear; try to tell me where they live."

"Oh! but I can't," came the quick reply. "I can't remember now. I can't remember anything but Reg, and he is waiting for me. He was always impatient if I did not go directly he wanted me, and he wants me now." Her eyes left Alison's face, and wandered restlessly round the room, as though in search of something or some one. "He wants me, you see. I must go quickly, because he is waiting."

Her voice died down into a whisper, her eyes closed, and the fear at Alison's heart quickened.

"Tell me where his mother is," she said. "Can you tell me that?"

"I don't remember—anything—now—only that Reg—is waiting—and I—am coming—coming——"

A light swept over her face, her eyes

opened wide, she flung out her arms, as if in greeting.

"Reg," she cried, "why, Reg—I am coming. Were you waiting long for me, my dear?" And at that moment the door behind Alison opened, and Mrs. Jennings, followed by the doctor, came into the room.

CHAPTER III

"IT IS MY ONE CHANCE"

"NO—oh! no, nothing could have been done."

The doctor looked down into Alison's troubled face, and shook his head as he answered her question. "If I had seen the poor thing days ago, I doubt whether it would have made any difference. Malarial fever, the long journey down to the coast, and the shock and sorrow of her husband's loss—all these are quite sufficient to account for her death. I suppose it will be possible to send for her people?"

"She told me she had no relations, and no friends," Alison answered, "and, though I pressed her to give me the address of her husband's family, she—died before she could give it to me. Perhaps Mr. Jennings knew something about them."

This conversation was being carried on in the drawing-room that opened out of that

silent room, into which, only half an hour before, death had come so suddenly: and into this drawing-room Doctor Trenchard had drawn Alison, to question her respecting the patient who had died at the very moment of his entrance. Mrs. Jennings, overwhelmed and upset by the shock of what had occurred, was only too thankful to allow Alison to answer all the medical man's inquiries: for, with the helplessness of her class in an emergency of this description, she welcomed the possibility of shifting responsibility upon another's shoulders. Mr. Jennings, a typical seafaring man, hovered uneasily on the stairs and in the passage, ready to make himself of use when required: and when the doctor summoned him, he came promptly into the drawing-room, and gave his information with terse clearness. He understood Mrs. Metcalfe had come on their boat, because she could not afford to travel by an ordinary liner. She had been the only passenger on board, and had seemed ill from the first. He, Robert Jennings, had acted as steward and waited upon her, and it was for this reason he had helped her ashore. When she found no one to meet her, she had been terribly put about, and kept on saying, over and over again, that she hadn't money enough for an hotel, or to

take the train to where her husband's folks lived; and she had seemed so ill, that he thought the only thing to do was to bring her to his house, and then send for her relations.

"No," he answered, in reply to Doctor Trenchard, "no, I can't say as I know anything more about the lady. She told me her husband was killed by treacherous niggers, up in Central Africa somewhere, and that she was alone in the world. But she warn't one to talk much, and it was plain to see she was a real lady, and no mistake about it."

"We don't get much more forward than we were before," the doctor said to Alison, when Jennings had left them alone together, "and I am afraid the only thing to do, is to search through the poor lady's things and find some address to which we can write. I can give a certificate of death without difficulty, and I could make arrangements to have Mrs. Metcalfe buried here, but we must first try to communicate with some one belonging to her."

"Certainly we must," Alison repeated. "Would you like—shall I ask Mrs. Jennings to look through——"

"I should not like to ask Mrs. Jennings to rummage amongst that poor thing's

belongings," Doctor Trenchard interposed hurriedly. He was an impetuous little man, with an abrupt manner, which seemed to match his shrewd grey eyes, and closely cropped grey hair. "No, I would much rather not ask Mrs. Jennings to look for the address. As far as I could gather from what her husband said when he came to fetch me, she was very much vexed with him for bringing Mrs. Metcalfe here at all, and very averse to receiving her. I am afraid Mrs. Jennings is not made of the stuff out of which good Samaritans are manufactured."

"Then——"

"It seems to me a piece of good fortune, or very providential, or whatever you choose to call it, that you are here just now, Miss Dering. A lady is wanted to deal with a matter of this sort—a lady, and a woman of honour." His keen eyes ran over the girl's tall form, and lingered an instant on her face. "I think I may constitute myself the chief authority in this business, and I should wish *you* to look amongst Mrs. Metcalfe's possessions, and find out some address to which we can write. Indeed, I think it would be as well if you actually wrote the letter," he added thoughtfully. "Your tact and judgment would help you to word it more gently and

kindly, than a rough old fellow like me could do. Will you undertake this ? "

For the fraction of a second Alison hesitated. Sometimes, in the days that came after, she found herself wondering whether it was her good angel who had made her hesitate for that brief moment, with a strange presentiment that she would do well not to agree to Doctor Trenchard's suggestion. How often in the aftertime did she wish that she had followed the promptings of that strange presentiment! But her hesitation was very brief, so brief indeed, that the doctor, waiting for her reply, scarcely noticed that it did not come quickly upon the heels of his question.

" I will write for you if you wish it," Alison answered slowly, " that is to say, if I find any address to which I can write. I suppose it is just possible I may not find one. In that case what can we do ? "

The doctor shrugged his shoulders.

" We could advertise, but that would involve a troublesome delay. If you find no address amongst Mrs. Metcalfe's luggage, I think we should be obliged to arrange that her funeral should take place here, and meanwhile we could advertise, and make inquiries. But I have every hope that an

address will be found. I will look in again this evening, to hear from you what has happened, but as I have a long round before me, I may be late. Good afternoon, Miss Dering."

The little doctor left the room with characteristic impetuosity, and Alison turned away to the silent chamber, where Rose Metcalfe lay sleeping her last long sleep. Mrs. Jennings moved about the room, setting it in order, and to her Alison whispered the main points of the late conversation with the doctor, winding up with a request that the dead girl's box and bag might be brought into the drawing-room, in order that she could try to find in them the address they sought. Mrs. Jennings nodded acquiescence and bustled away to fulfil Alison's behest, whilst the girl herself went softly to the bedside, and looked down at the still face on the pillow. All the lines which sickness and sorrow had carved upon it, Death had wiped away—it was smooth and peaceful as the face of a sleeping child. Round the small head the golden hair lay like a halo of light, and the mysterious triumphant smile which hovered over the lips seemed to assure Alison of the dead girl's happiness.

"I think I envy you," the living woman

whispered, bending down to touch with caressing fingers the fair, soft hair; "you have finished with all the fret and stir of life; you and your Reg are together, and nothing will ever worry you any more. I believe I wish I were in your place, instead of having to struggle, and struggle just for mere life. I wish I were you." She stooped lower over the bed, and kissed the still face of the dead, whilst her own words seemed to echo and re-echo in her brain.

"I wish I were you—I wish I were you." She turned away from the bed mechanically, after she had given that kiss, but before leaving the bedchamber, she glanced back over her shoulder at Rose's lovely face.

"I must bring you flowers," she said, almost as if she thought the dead could hear. "I kissed you because it is so sad and lonely to go down to your grave unkissed, uncared for; and now, though you are lucky to be dead, I will bring you flowers!"

She went back to the drawing-room, closing the door of communication behind her, and at the same moment Mr. Jennings entered from the passage, carrying a small trunk on his shoulder and a little bag in his hand.

"I'm glad to hear the doctor wishes you

to see to the lady's box, miss," he said, "I got fond of the poor, pretty little thing, seeing she wasn't much more than a child; and it don't seem right as anyone but a lady —a—understanding lady, should pry into what belonged to her."

Mrs. Jennings, following in the rear, did not look as if she entirely echoed her husband's sentiments. Her lips were tightly closed, and her face wore an expression, which Alison had learnt to know and to dread. And though she spoke no word, she tossed her head at the end of her husband's speech, and the gesture was singularly significant. But it was evident that Alison's landlady was not altogether the same person when Mr. Jennings was at home, as when he was at sea, and it was perfectly obvious that the worthy sailor was master in his own house: for his wife's objections were only indicated by that toss of the head, and an indignant sniff, and as soon as the box and bag had been deposited on the floor, Mr. Jennings put his hand on her shoulder.

"Now, Maria, we'll get along downstairs, and leave Miss Dering to see to these things by herself," he said firmly; "she won't want our help, and we're best out of the way."

Alison did not expect that her usually

truculent landlady would obey this decisive command. But to her no small amusement and relief, Mrs. Jennings meekly submitted to her husband's decree, and the door closed behind them, leaving Alison alone to the work before her.

"I will just look for the address," she thought, "then I will lock the things up again at once, and they will be all ready to send to Mrs. Metcalfe's people. I shall probably find a letter of some sort, that will give me what I want directly."

During these reflections she had been opening the black bag, a very old and shabby one, and with reverent fingers turned over the heterogeneous collection of things it contained; searching for anything in the shape of papers, or letters. But neither letters nor papers were there. In a pocket of the bag, however, she discovered a small bunch of keys, and with one of these unlocked the trunk, which was crammed to overflowing, and had evidently been packed by hasty, perhaps utterly weary, hands. A muddle of clothes lay on the top of the trunk, clothes put in pell-mell, unfolded, and uncared for; next came a few books, a writing-case, and a box, which, being locked, Alison concluded might contain that for which she

was looking. She opened the writing-case first, and glanced quickly through it, but there was no sign here of any letter bearing an English address. Indeed, except for paper and envelopes, and a half-finished letter, the case was practically empty.

Hoping that it might furnish the clue for which she was seeking, Alison looked at that letter. It was written in a neat girlish hand, and ran,—

"MY DEAREST MOTHER,—

"Reg told me I must call you that, or I do not think I should have dared to write the words. I can only just remember my own mother, and it is beautiful to think I am going to find a mother now in you. I am leaving Africa at once, and going straight home to you as your cable tells me to do. To be with you and Reg's father, will help me to bear this dreadful thing. I am so sorry you have not received either of the letters I wrote you. We discovered after they were sent, that the carriers had deceived us and that the letters never reached the coast at all. It seems terrible to think that this is the very first letter you have had from your daughter-in-law, no,—I think I will say your daughter. I like to think I shall be

that to you, because you have no girls of your own, and Reg has so often told me how much you longed for a daughter. It is strange that you do not even know my handwriting, and you do not know what my face is like—unless my dear Reg told you. Shall I try to describe myself now? I——"

There the letter broke off, and Alison laid it down, with a choking sensation in her throat, wondering why it had never been finished, or sent to the far-away mother-in-law for whom it was intended. The writing-case having failed to give her any help in her search, she fitted a key into the small shabby box, which might once have served as a jewel case, but was now packed tightly with papers. Alison gave vent to a sigh of relief when she saw the packet of letters, and one or two more formidable documents. Here, at any rate, she was certain to find the address of some one to whom she could write, to communicate the news of Rosamund's death; and taking the box in her lap, she sat down in the cretonne-covered armchair by the window, and drew out the packet of letters.

"Reg's letters to me," was inscribed upon it in the same neat girlish hand that had written the letter just read by Alison, and

she put the packet aside reverently, feeling a sick compunction over this handling of the dead girl's dearest treasures. The next packet bore in the same hand—

"Letters to Reg from his mother," and on the third, a much smaller package, were the words—

"Letters to me from Reg's mother."

It was at this packet that Alison paused. Very little besides was left in the box, only a few scattered letters in faded ink, bearing the marks of age, two folded documents plainly of a legal nature, and an envelope bearing an official seal. Alison thought it was obvious that the address wanted would be amongst the letters in her hand, and after a second's shrinking pause, the instinctive pause of an honourable woman about to look at another person's correspondence, she drew one of the letters from its envelope. It was written on thick creamy paper, at whose top was a crest, and the engraved address, Pailsham Hall, Minley, Surrey. The letter was short, but every word breathed tender, yearning love.

"My dearest Rosamund,—

"I cannot tell you how I am longing to see the woman my dear boy has chosen to

be his wife, and though, if Reg's work in Africa continues, it may be years before you and I meet, I want to try and make you understand how much I shall love you, for my dear boy's sake, and for your own. I have never had a daughter, and I do not think I can tell you how much I have longed for one. Some day, my dear, when you and Reg come home, I shall hope to give you a most loving welcome, and try to show you how much I appreciate having a daughter of my own at last!

"Your loving mother,

"ELINOR METCALFE."

When she laid down this letter, there were tears on Alison's cheeks, and she was seized anew by a sick access of envy. That dead girl in the next room had been blest indeed! A husband's love and care had first been showered upon her, and then all the tenderness of a mother was laid at her feet, a tenderness which Alison felt sure would have been doubled and redoubled, for the widow of a dearly loved son. Why, ah! why had the golden-haired child next door sunk out of life, instead of making a stupendous effort to live, and to make the most of all that might have been hers.

"In her place I don't think I would have died," Alison murmured, her lips closing in a straight, determined line, "I would have *made* myself live, just to feel the joy of having a real mother like Mrs. Metcalfe, just to be a daughter to her. And now—she will never have 'the girl of her own,' she has been longing for so much."

Alison's eyes wandered towards the window; a bitter sense of the inequality of things stirred at her heart. Why, she wondered, should she be destined to face life alone, to fight her hard fight unloved, unaided, whilst the girl who lay there with the mystic smile of triumph on her face, could have lived in shelter and peace to the end of her days, if only she had not slipped away from life, out of sheer incapacity to cling to it?

Alison was strong, Alison was brimming over with energy and vital power; it seemed to her impossible, nay absurd, that death could not be kept at bay, if a sick person's will were only of reasonable strength. Ah! why—why—why had not this wonderful chance come to her? Why had not fate put into her capable hands, the gift which poor little Rosamund Metcalfe had dropped from her fingers. *She* would not have died. She would have gone to Pailsham Hall, she would

have been a daughter to the woman who would surely have been such a beautiful mother to her. If only they could have changed places—she, Alison Dering, and that poor pretty creature who lay dead. If only it could be she who was on her way to Pailsham Hall, to be a help and comfort to that mother's aching heart, whilst the lonely working woman with no future except an uphill struggle, no chances but the difficult scanty chances such a woman gets, lay in her coffin at rest! If only, in some mysterious fashion, the two identities could have been altered, so that it might be possible for her, with her keen capacity for life and happiness, to grasp those things for which her soul cried out, what an all-wise ordering of providence such a mysterious alteration would be! For a moment she sat there, her hands clasped in her lap, her eyes fixed on the grey and gloomy sky without, her thoughts busy with all that such extraordinary transmogrification would mean for her; with all that her life as it was at present constituted was likely to hold. And throughout the long series of her reflections, she was conscious of the grey and desolate world outside, that harmonized so well with the grey desolation of her future.

In spite of her thoughts she heard the incessant and monotonous drip of the rain; the sound depressed her and irritated her nerves. If only she and the dead woman could have changed places, she would find a mother and home, shelter, security, happiness, instead of the loneliness and uncertainty of her present existence. If only——

Her restlessly moving hands suddenly became still; her eyes, still fixed on the leaden sky, suddenly grew alert and eager, she drew herself into a more upright position, and the new alertness in her eyes became apparent also in her face.

If only she and the dead woman could change places. But—why should they not change places? This was the thought that had flashed in amongst Alison's reflections, like a streak of vivid lightning across a lowering sky; would it not be possible for her to take the place of the girl who was going back to her husband's home as a stranger, going amongst people to whom she was utterly unknown?

Alison's first impulse was to thrust the thought from her as an absurdity, an idea too much outside the realms of the actual, to be contemplated for a single moment; she was an honourable woman, as Doctor Tren-

chard had most truly said; the mere suggestion of such a thing, even in her own mind, was an outrage upon her honour. And yet—in spite of her own indignant refutation of its possibility, the idea would not be thus summarily dismissed, on the contrary—it grew, and grew.

Why, after all, she argued with herself, why should it be so desperately wrong of her to try to gain something which would make no one else a loser? Rosamund Metcalfe was dead. She could never claim her rights for herself; and death had for ever deprived her of them; why then should not another woman profit in her stead? Profit in a way that could never really harm any living soul? As the reflexions chased one another through her mind in quick succession, Alison could no longer sit still. Rapid movement seemed the only means by which she could either think out the strange problem suddenly presented to her, or thrust it for ever from her soul; and she pushed back her chair, and began to pace the room with hurried, uneven steps. At first her honourable and right instincts swept aside all others; she declared to herself vehemently that these thoughts were merely the wildest fancies rioting in her brain, that never for a single moment did she dream of putting such

ideas into practice. But the more she paced up and down the trimly furnished drawing-room, the harder did she find it to put away from her the reflection that it would be fatally, marvellously easy, to effect the change she had been considering.

Every word the dead girl had spoken, every word in the elder Mrs. Metcalfe's letter, pointed to the fact, that Rosamund was totally unknown to her husband's family; that they had never even seen her handwriting, much less her portrait. They knew no more of her, than if she had been as much of a stranger as—as for instance Alison Dering herself. And—if she, Alison, could only remove herself for ever from the prying eyes of the Jennings, from the shrewd ones of Doctor Trenchard; if she could so arrange the matter that the address of the Metcalfes should remain for ever unknown to them, why then—what need prevent her from carrying out her scheme in its entirety? What reason would she have to fear that her fraud would ever be discovered?

Fraud. That ugly word brought her hurrying footsteps to a standstill, brought her up short, as it were, before her own contemplated action; gave her a realization of the abyss she was preparing to open before

her own feet. Fraud! It was an ugly sounding word; the deed itself would be an ugly deed, so ugly, that Alison was seized by a sudden shrinking fear at the very contemplation of it. Her feet had paused beside the window, outside which the grey and dreary dusk of a wet day was slowly gathering. And just as she had stood several hours earlier, gazing out at the damp, dismal outlook, so she stood again watching the raindrops chase one another along the panes, seeing in the monotony of the shining slate roofs, a presentment of the monotony of her own future. And, looking at the outside dreariness, the picture that rose before her mental vision became increasingly entrancing and irresistible.

A home, a real, beautiful home, with a mother to love her and care for her; that picture alone was sufficient to bring a lump into the girl's throat again, when she set it against the years she had lately passed, the years spent either in doing hard work, or searching for it, with a vista of miserable rooms in cheap lodging-houses, merely dwelling places to which it was absurd mockery to apply the word home.

Conscience fought hard, for Alison was no adventuress, bent on the compassing of her own

ends by fair means or foul, heedless of what harm might be wrought for others by her actions. She was a girl of simple and good upbringing, a girl, who, twenty-four, nay, twelve hours earlier, would have scorned the bare idea of telling a lie, or of stooping to the smallest deception. She was not born of the stuff of which adventuresses are made, the stuff which will stoop to everything, and stop at nothing, to gain its ends. Perhaps Alison's character was marked by unusual strength, but beyond this, there was nothing in her nature to distinguish her from other girls of her age and class. That the temptation which had suddenly arisen in her path was a strange and unusual one, doubtless ought not to have affected the question of her resistance to it; but it had taken Alison unawares, in her weakest moment, it appealed to her in quite an extraordinary fashion; and one by one the resisting forces within gave way, before the terrible power of the temptation from without. The ease with which she could take the step so insidiously indicated to her, made the silencing of her conscience more determined and effectual. And with that self-deception which must always enter so largely into any deliberate stifling of conscience, she assured herself that to tell

Mrs. Metcalfe of her daughter-in-law's death, was needless cruelty; it would be far truer kindness to assume the part of the dead girl, and to be a faithful and loving daughter to the lady waiting in Pailsham Hall.

It is always astonishingly easy to prove to oneself that wrong is right, or can be made right. A very few more turns up and down the room, a very little more time spent in looking out at the fast darkening street, served to convince Alison Dering that in the end she would be doing the great right of making an old lady happy, in doing the little wrong of personating the dead. The more she contemplated the deed, the easier did the fulfilment of it become. Ways and means shaped themselves in her brain with amazing rapidity: she almost laughed as the simplicity of the whole plan shaped itself before her eyes; and long before Mrs. Jennings crept softly into the room, lamp in hand, Alison's scheme was full-fledged, ready and more than ready to be carried into effect.

But before she finally wrote the letter which was to make such a vast difference to her own life, and the lives of others, there was still something Alison wished to do, something which she felt would justify her to herself, and exonerate her from all blame.

And so it came about that when Mrs. Jennings, having deposited her lamp on the round central table, after casting one inquisitive and wistful glance at the open box and bag, had gone to rejoin her husband in the kitchen, Alison stepped softly from the lighted room, into the darkened chamber of death beyond. She carried the lamp with her, and her hand shook a little as she set it down upon the chest of drawers, at the foot of the bed. The room was very still, so still that Alison started and shivered when a gust of wind outside drove a fresh scutter of rain against the window; so still, that her own breathing seemed to make too obtrusive a sound, and her own footsteps seemed to call forth tremendous echoes.

A sheet covered the quiet form on the bed. Looking at its straight and rigid outlines, another shudder ran through Alison's frame, and she crept unwillingly to the bedside, though she felt impelled to carry out what she had come here to do. With shaking fingers she lifted the end of the sheet, so that the light of the lamp fell upon the peaceful dead face, where a triumphant smile still lingered. The extreme girlishness of the face was more marked now that death had wiped away all the tired lines about the lips; and

Rosamund Metcalfe, with her halo of golden hair, looked more like a sleeping child than a woman who had known the joys and anguish of wifehood and widowhood. Alison bent over her, and gently touched the cold white face.

"Will you forgive me?" she whispered, "will you forgive me if I take your name, your home, and all that was meant for you? I am so poor, and so lonely, and so miserable, will you forgive me if I do this?" As she spoke, she watched the dead features with eager, hungry eyes, almost as if she expected some response to her question.

"Will you forgive me?" she repeated, "if I build up a new life for myself on yours that is over? It is my one chance, will you let me take it?"

The eager hurried whisper died into silence, and Alison stood upright again, gazing down at the white features, intense anxiety depicted on her own. At that moment the lamp flickered feebly, and in the flickering light, it seemed to the girl's excited imagination that a smile passed over the dead woman's face; she almost fancied that the lips moved, that the eyes opened. And, with the distorted fancy of excitement, she interpreted the signs as an affirmative answer to her passion-

ate questions. A little triumphant smile flashed over her own face; the over-exuberant imaginings hushed the last remonstrances of conscience; with an impetuous movement she bent over Rosamund Metcalfe, and kissed the cold forehead.

"I think I always knew you would let me do it," she whispered, as if she were speaking to living ears, that could hear and understand her. "I promise you I will never be unworthy of what you are letting me take—your name and your life. I promise you I will try and fill your place, as you would like it filled. I promise you that, and —God bless you." Only a person whose nature was highly strung, and who was temporarily overwrought and unnerved, could perhaps have behaved just as Alison behaved in that quiet death chamber. But nature had bestowed upon her just such a sensitive and highly strung temperament; and the circumstances of her past few years, with the real hardships she had lately endured, had combined to produce a condition of nerves and brain such as her present one. In the exaltation of the moment, some great sacrifice would have seemed to her as natural and right, as did her proposed theft of another woman's name and personality.

For the time she was mentally incapable of realizing that she was meditating the doing of a great wrong; conscience was so successfully stifled, that she no longer even saw the wrong; she was so sure she had obtained the dead girl's sanction for her act; she was so certain of her good intentions towards the elder Mrs. Metcalfe, and of her determination to be a daughter to that lady, that she lost all true sense of proportion; she saw the whole matter only from her own standpoint; she forgot, and she deliberately thrust from her, every other point of view, and every consideration, which could conflict with her own fixed and irrevocable decision.

CHAPTER IV

A LETTER FROM ROSAMUND!

"STANLEY—my dear Stanley, please come here quickly: come and see this letter from poor dear Rosamund."

The low voice was tremulous with eagerness, and when Mr. Metcalfe hastened into his wife's boudoir, from his own dressing-room into which it opened, he found the invalid sitting up on her couch, her face flushed, her eyes shining, an open letter held out to him in her shaking hands.

"Stanley—the dear girl has arrived," she exclaimed, her voice more tremulous than before. "We must have miscalculated the dates. She is actually in England, and writes to say she hopes to be with us to-morrow."

"To-morrow—dear me, dear me," Mr. Metcalfe ejaculated, taking the letter from his wife, and adjusting his pincenez on his well-shaped nose, "Rosamund *arrived?* But why has she not come straight to us? Why

did she not wire directly she landed? Dear me, dear me, I am very sorry no one was at Southampton to meet her. Poor girl—she must have felt terribly lonely and stranded."

"She writes very bravely, as if she had plenty of self-reliance," Mrs. Metcalfe answered, her voice still tremulous with excitement, "and she does not seem in the least surprised that no one was there."

Mr. Metcalfe's eyes were scanning the letter in his hand, he scarcely seemed to hear his wife's eager, disjointed sentences, and as he read, a puzzled expression flitted across his features.

"I can't quite understand why she did not write to us sooner," he said slowly, looking over his glasses, into Mrs. Metcalfe's flushed face: "as far as I can understand she reached Southampton on Saturday, and to-day is Wednesday. Why has she waited until now, to let us know of her arrival?"

"'Read to the end, Stanley dear, and you will understand it all. She explains everything. Poor dear child! It hurts me to think that she should have had the burden of a friend's sudden illness and death, when she was alone, and in great sorrow herself. Read her letter aloud to me, dear, I feel as if I had not grasped the whole of it."

Mr. Metcalfe seated himself beside the couch, and turning again to the first page of the letter, read aloud:

"ROYAL HOTEL, WINCHESTER,

"*April* 18th.

MY DEAR MOTHER,—

May I really call you by that name, though it seems impertinent of me to write the word? I have reached England at last, and if you will let me come to you, I could reach you to-morrow. I wish I could tell you properly how much I long to be with you: but I cannot write one quarter of what is in my heart. My ship reached Southampton on Saturday, but until to-day, I have been too dazed, too upset, to think of myself or my own plans at all. A friend who has also lately come from Africa, was taken ill at Southampton, and died suddenly, so suddenly that it completely unnerved me. All the arrangements were in my hands,—and the poor thing (Alison Dering) was buried this morning. I came over here, because I felt I could not bear to stay in the lodgings where my friend died, and now I am only waiting for a message from you, to say that I may go to you.

I want to show you that I will indeed be a daughter to you, if you will let me try.

Your loving,
ROSAMUND.

"Poor girl," he said gently, refolding the letter and returning it to his wife, "what a sad arrival for her! I wish she had telegraphed to me on landing, I could have gone down to help her. Dear me, a funeral to arrange,—poor child! Of course, Elinor, we must telegraph to her to come to us immediately. In fact, I should like to go to Winchester to-day, and fetch her."

"I thought you would suggest doing that," Mrs. Metcalfe answered, taking her husband's hand in hers. "I knew you would want to go and bring our new daughter home, Stanley. Having her here will seem almost like having a bit of my dear boy with me,—my dear Reg." The mother's voice shook, her soft eyes dimmed with sudden tears; she could not even now speak of her dead son with calmness, and her husband pressed her hand in silent sympathy, stooping down at the same time to kiss her forehead.

"Everything is ready for the dear child," Mrs. Metcalfe went on after a moment's pause, "I have tried to make her room as

cheerful and peaceful as possible for her, and Master's niece is to arrive to-morrow to be her maid, as we arranged. We will do our best to make Rosamund happy—Reggie's Rosamund—his Rose of all the world." Mrs. Metcalfe's voice sank into dreaminess, her eyes seemed to be looking into a distance very far removed from the blue stretch of April sky, visible outside the open window.

Mr. Metcalfe pushed back his chair sharply, and rising with an abrupt gesture, walked to the window, and looked out. His usually quiet face worked painfully, his lips quivered, and he put his hand against the window sill, as though to steady himself. The loss of his only surviving son had been a bitter blow to the genial squire of Minley, and his eyes, like his wife's, were dim with tears, as he looked across the wide expanse of park and garden. Those smooth slopes of velvet lawn, the great elms in which the rooks cawed softly, the park whose wooded slopes climbed to the heather land on the other side of the valley, all these were to have been Reginald's, in the day when Reginald's father would lie at rest amongst his forbears in the little churchyard. But Reginald himself had died first, died far away from the peaceful Surrey village, and the little grey church on the hill-side; and Pailsham Hall,

with its acres of field and woodland, would pass to a nephew, for whom both Mr. Metcalfe and his wife cherished a distaste bordering on active dislike.

A little stifled sob from the sofa made the Squire turn sharply from the window to kneel beside his invalid wife, and stroke her white hair with the caressing touch which never failed to soothe her.

"It will be good for us both to have Rosamund with us," Mrs. Metcalfe whispered; "we shall have to forget ourselves, in helping her. Her sorrow is greater than ours."

"You and she will help each other," Mr. Metcalfe answered gently; "she will find comfort in having such a mother as you will be to her, dear wife; and she has promised to be a daughter to you. But if I am to go and fetch her from Winchester to-day, I ought to be looking up trains, instead of stopping to gossip."

Mrs. Metcalfe smiled up into her husband's face, and her eyes watched him tenderly, as he went out of her room, shutting the door softly behind him.

"My dear old Stanley," she mused, "I hope our daughter will be as great a comfort to him, as I feel she is going to be to me. I

think he has longed for a daughter as much as I have; and now that our boy is gone——

Her thoughts broke off; she did not dare pursue them, because her husband might at any moment re-enter the room, and it was her constant effort to hide from him the never-ending sorrow which the death of her son had been to her. No one ever realized how deeply, how continually her lost son was mourned by the gentle mistress of Pailsham Hall, whose grief was never allowed to obtrude itself upon others; whose unselfish sympathy was always ready for every comer; whose lovely little sitting-room was a haven of refuge for both the rich and poor of the neighbourhood.

Everybody who had a joy or a sorrow brought it to Mrs. Metcalfe, and no one who came to her, ever went away disappointed. She was one of those thrice blessèd people—a woman with a heart at leisure from itself—and, invalid though she was, her life was most truly a life lived for others; a life in which self had no part at all.

It was with a smiling face that she greeted her husband when he came back to her room, and she entered into the arrangements for his journey, with all the zest of a young and active person, looking up his trains, writing

out the telegram to be dispatched to her daughter in law, and interesting herself in every detail of her husband's journey, with that whole-hearted sympathy which made her so charming a companion.

"Give the child my dear love," she said to Mr. Metcalfe when he was prepared to start; "tell her she will have a real mother's welcome from me; tell her how much we want to comfort her and make her happy; tell her —all that her coming means to us!"

CHAPTER V

"I MUST GO ON NOW"

"COMING to fetch you—reach Winchester three o'clock.—METCALFE, Pailsham Hall, Minley."

The above telegram was put into Alison Dering's hands as she knelt on the floor of her bedroom at the hotel, where she was engaged in packing a small and unobtrusive-looking box. It was the same box, which, only five days ago, had stood in the drawing-room of Mrs. Jennings' lodgings at Southampton, when Alison's hands had searched its contents for the address that was written in straggling characters on the telegraph form she now held; and some recollection of that search, and of everything to which it had led, made the girl scramble hurriedly to her feet, and shut down the lid of the box, with a sudden gesture of remorse.

"God forgive me," she whispered, a sob catching her breath; "I wish—oh! I wish I had never done it,—and yet—and yet——"

She glanced again at the telegram, and though its words were already engraved upon her mind, she read them aloud, with slow deliberation.

"Coming to fetch you—reach Winchester three o'clock."

"I suppose I have burnt my boats now," she exclaimed, laughing a very unmirthful laugh, "and I feel partly glad that I have done it, and partly as if I would give the whole world to undo it again. But—I can't undo it now, I can't,—I can't,"—she rose and moved restlessly up and down the room,—"it is my one chance in life,—and I can't let it go. God forgive me if I am doing horribly wrong—but—I must go on now."

Upon her face, which had been white before, two spots of colour burnt feverishly, her eyes were curiously bright, and as she paced the floor, she was breathing quickly, and unevenly.

"I wonder if I have forgotten anything," she soliloquized, pausing before the glass on the dressing-table, and surveying her own reflection with critical eyes. "I tried to remember all I ought to have, and of course—I shall say—I must say that I could not get everything at once. It is true enough to say I could not afford it." She laughed again,

a little uncertainly, and her thoughts travelled back over the days just past, during which she had played the prologue to the play, upon which the curtain would rise in a few hours.

The first step taken, everything else had been fatally easy, much more easy even than she had anticipated. A letter to the hotel at Winchester had brought an answer by return of post, and this letter she had herself taken from the hands of the postman, allowing the doctor and the Jennings to suppose that it was written to her by Rosamund Metcalfe's relations. To tell these unsuspecting people that Mr. and Mrs Metcalfe were unable to be present at the funeral, but that they desired it to take place quietly at Southampton, was simplicity itself; and with a sharp stab of conscience, Alison realized with what terrible facility a woman credited with a sense of honour that is above reproach, can trade upon that honour. None doubted her word. If Doctor Trenchard was surprised that no relatives of the dead woman appeared at her modest funeral, his surprise merely took the form of indignation against the relations; he suspected no treachery. If the Jennings thought it extraordinary that the very simplest funeral should be arranged

for their lodger, who had tarried with them for so short a time, they, too, laid all the blame at the door of the relations, who seemed to leave every arrangement in the hands of a stranger. They did not know—how should they have known it?—how the money was raised that paid for that quiet funeral. Alison's goings out and comings in were the concern of no one but herself, and her visits to a distant pawnbroker remained her own secret. The small store of jewellery she had found in the dead girl's box brought in more than a sufficient sum to pay the doctor, Mrs. Jennings, and the funeral expenses; and left Alison with money in hand. And her conscience, having grown elastic, she was able to justify her action by promising herself that she would redeem the things pawned, as soon as it was in her power to do so. To tell Mrs. Jennings and the doctor that after the funeral she was to go and visit Rosamund Metcalfe's people, was the next step in her path, a step so easy to take that she wondered afterwards why the thought of it had ever made her shrink and shiver. To give her landlady, as her address the number of a certain street in which she had once stayed in London, was quite simple too, and it satisfied Mrs. Jennings, who knew nothing of the

Metropolis, and concluded that the address given was that of the Metcalfe family.

Mrs. Jennings saw Alison off from the station, and the landlady was under the impression that she had taken a ticket for London; but that impression was not borne out by facts, for Alison booked no further than to Winchester, from which place she wrote that letter to Mrs. Metcalfe, the letter which sealed her fate, and made turning back an impossibility.

The dust of Southampton once shaken from her feet, any clues by which either Doctor Trenchard or Mrs. Jennings could trace her, having been satisfactorily disposed of, she took her next step, and proceeded to do away with the identity of Alison Dering, and adopt in its place the identity of Rosamund Metcalfe.

True, she had written in her own name to the hotel at Winchester, but before she had presented herself there, she transformed herself into a person totally unlike the one who had alighted from the train at the station. Leaving her boxes in the cloak-room, she repaired to a large shop in the High Street, where she exchanged her own coloured clothes for a simple black skirt, and a black silk blouse, buying herself at the same time

a plain black coat and hat. Thus it was, that when she reached the Royal Hotel, she was garbed in unostentatious but deep mourning, which bore out all that she had written to the manageress. She asked whether a room had been reserved for Mrs. Metcalfe by Miss Alison Dering who had written from Southampton about it; and receiving an affirmative reply, stated that she was the Mrs. Metcalfe named, and that she would probably remain two or three days in the hotel. The manageress never guessed how fast the visitor's heart was beating under the decorous black garments, nor with what anxiety the stranger's grey eyes scanned her listener's face, whilst she told her story. To the listener indeed, there was nothing strange or uncommon in what the tall lady in black was saying; that rooms should be written for by a person of one name, and taken by a person of another, was no unusual occurrence, and Miss Dering, in writing, had distinctly mentioned that her friend, Mrs. Metcalfe, was a young widow. The manageress therefore neither felt nor evinced the smallest surprise, but conducted the new guest to her room with a matter-of-fact demeanour, that effectually calmed all Alison's fears. She had allowed one day to elapse before writing to

Minley, and that day she had spent in getting rid of every single article in her own box, which could by any possibility lead to her identification.

From her linen she cut out all the marks, and then laid it at the bottom of her own box, putting with it all her coloured clothes, after which she dispatched the box and its contents to a London hospital, with the brief note, "For the use of the patients." Next she burnt every letter she possessed, every bill and every note-book, in fact everything which bore her name, or could be used to identify her in the future. Any of her things which could not be so used, she transferred to Rosamund Metcalfe's box, the contents of which were now almost as well known to her, as if they had been actually her own. With one exception. Two tiny packets of letters, marked respectively "Reg's letters to me," and "My letters to Reg," Alison had locked away as they were in the old battered despatch box, feeling that those letters must for ever be sacred and hidden from all prying eyes. She had sought amongst the dead woman's treasures for any portrait of Reginald, but her search had been quite unavailing, and it seemed certain that Rosamund had possessed no likeness of her husband.

Besides those black garments Alison had bought for herself, she had made some other purchases since her arrival in Winchester. Selecting a small jeweller's shop in a street leading out of the main thoroughfare of the city, she had nervously asked for a wedding ring, growing hot all over under the curious and amused stare of the shopman, choosing with all possible speed the first ring that fitted her slim finger, in order that she might escape from the glance of those inquisitive and twinkling eyes.

She had omitted nothing that could make her position secure; she had forgotten no detail of the programme she intended to carry out, and now—the prologue was ended at last, and the curtain was about to roll up for the play itself, the play that would take her all the rest of her life, to act to its conclusion.

"I must go on now," Alison repeated the words aloud, whilst she moved mechanically to the window, and looked down upon the peaceful little Hotel garden; "I don't think I am made of the same stuff as an unscrupulous adventuress, but even I feel that I must go on to the end,—the bitter end—or the sweet —I wonder—ah! I wonder." Stirred by a restlessness which she could not subdue,

she turned from the window, and went back to the dressing-table, there to survey herself earnestly again in the glass.

"Of course I have not got myself proper widow's clothes yet," she whispered, in quick nervous tones, and as if she were addressing the remark to some one; "I had neither the money, nor the time. Well! there's time enough anyhow," she added with a short laugh. "I couldn't have afforded to buy anything more than I have bought, and as it is I shall have to borrow from my—my Father-in-law to pay the Hotel bill." Again she laughed, the quick laugh of nervousness, and her hands moved restlessly amongst her hair, here patting a rebellious curl smooth, there settling the shining coils into shape. "I suppose they won't want me to wear—caps—widow's caps," she exclaimed, after a moment, "I—I don't believe I could do that. I should feel hysterical every time I looked at myself in the glass. I should look so funny in a cap with streamers." The mere thought of it made her laugh now, until the tears came into her eyes, and then a little sob broke from her.

"Oh! but I mustn't do this," she said, drawing away from the glass, "if I once begin to cry or—or really to laugh, I don't see how

I should ever be able to stop. And I must be ready for Mr. Metcalfe, I must be quite self-controlled and quiet when he comes. I dare not let myself think any more now; I must only remember that my boats are burnt, and I can never sail them again as long as I live. Alison Dering is dead—dead—dead; dead and buried in a grave at Southampton, a grave without a name, and only Rosamund Metcalfe is here to-day, waiting to begin her new life."

* * * * *

"A gentleman to see you, ma'am." The chambermaid entered Alison's room with these words, just as a clock in the hall below struck three: "he's in the sitting-room downstairs, ma'am," the girl added, as Alison hesitated, and looked at her with a curious blank stare she felt unable to interpret.

"Thank you," Alison answered hurriedly, "I will come down at once; it is a gentleman I was expecting," and snatching a handkerchief from the table, she ran quickly down the staircase, not allowing herself time to pause or think, until she reached the door of the public sitting-room. There, for a moment, she stood still, and her breath came quickly.

"I can't do it," some voice within her seemed to whisper.

"You must do it. It is too late now to draw back," murmured another voice, "remember you have burnt your boats; the time to draw back is past, you must go on now—to the end," and with the echoes of that voice still sounding in her heart, she turned the handle of the door.


ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY
LIBRARY
OF THE
BOMBAY
BRANCH
OF THE

CHAPTER VI

'WELCOME HOME!

MR. METCALFE stood beside the window of the hotel sitting-room, looking out at the strip of smooth green lawn, and wondering as he had been wondering during the whole course of his journey from Minley to Winchester, what manner of woman he should find awaiting him at his journey's end. Like his wife, he had been favourably impressed by the letter they had received from their daughter-in-law, and as he tried to form a mental picture of Rosamund—rose of all the world, as Reginald his dead son had loved to call her,—fleeting memories of all that Reg had written about her recurred to his mind. Most of the letters Reg had written during his brief married life had been lost in their transit from the interior to the coast, and none of Rosamund's letters had arrived at all, save the one sent from Winchester; but Mr. Metcalfe remem-

bered, with a smile, the impassioned descriptions that Reginald, the lover, had given them of his treasure.

"She has hair like spun gold, the sunbeams seem to belong to it and never to leave it." These words came back to Mr. Metcalfe now, as he gazed absently at a bed of fragrant hyacinths, "and she has eyes as blue as forget-me-nots, in the meadow by the mill." This time the old Squire sighed, because memories of the days when Reg had fished by his side in those meadows by the mill, rose vividly before him, bringing with them the acute sense of loss and of a sorrow which could never be healed.

"My poor dear boy," he murmured, turning away from his contemplation of the sunshine, which suddenly seemed to hurt him, "my poor dear boy—and my boy's Rose. What must his loss have been to her if we——"

The door opened slowly; Mr. Metcalfe's sad thoughts were abruptly cut short, as a tall woman dressed in black entered the room, and advanced towards him with a certain timidity of gesture, that instantly appealed to the chivalry of the man who awaited her. He met her before she was half way across the room, and his hands went out to her, and

caught hers in a strong clasp, that seemed to the girl infinitely comforting and strong.

"My dear child," he said, a break in his voice, tears in his eyes, "my dear child,"—and then he paused, as if incapable of further speech, his glance resting on the down-bent head, his hands still holding hers in that comforting clasp.

"I," she faltered, "I"—and with that one word she lifted her grey eyes to his face, and Mr. Metcalfe, seeing in them an appeal of infinite wistfulness and pathos, stooped to kiss her forehead, and say gently:

"Welcome home, my dear. My wife and I have been longing for you; we will do our best,—our best."—Again his voice faltered and failed, and his emotion seemed to give the woman before him courage to speak.

"I have come to be your daughter," she said, an odd impulsiveness in her tones, "it —is all I want,—all I care about,—to be a good daughter to you, and Mrs. Metcalfe."

Her voice trembled, she spoke so eagerly and rapidly that her words fell over one another, and her face flushed: "you will let me be a daughter to you?" she added, with such wistful anxiety that Mr. Metcalfe drew her nearer to him, and put his hand gently on her hair.

"I don't think my wife and I will ever be able to tell you how happy it makes us, to think of having a daughter of our own; it helps to take away some of our pain and sorrow,—and I hope it will help to bring you happiness again."

"Oh! it will make me happier than I"—Alison was beginning, when a sudden recollection of what she was saying, and of the part she had set herself to play, silenced her words, and sent a tide of colour over her face. It would not do for Reginald's widow to say that her widowhood in his parents' house would be happier than anything else in her life. Such a statement as that was the last she ought to make, and her heart beat fast as she realized what a close watch she would be obliged to keep over her every word and action, lest she should again blunder into similar mistakes. But she saw, to her relief, that Mr. Metcalfe had not observed her slip, and before he could reply to her she said quickly—

"I know that with you—and—and Reg's mother I shall be at peace. I don't think you can ever know what it means to me to be going to your home, and to feel it will be my home too."

It was highly probable that the Master of

Pailsham Hall and his wife never would know what their goodness meant to the woman who was now taking advantage of their hospitality, and abusing their good faith; and when Mr. Metcalfe's hand rested again tenderly on her shoulder, a fresh pang of compunction stabbed Alison's heart. She had stamped hard upon her conscience, but a conscience is not easily reduced to silence, especially when, as in Alison's case, its guidance had hitherto been sought and followed.

"If I told him the truth now," the swift thought flashed through her brain, "if I told him now, perhaps he would forgive me; he is so kind, he would be sorry and forgive."

But following quickly upon this thought, came the equally swift realization of everything that would be involved by a confession of her deception, and with the lightning rapidity of mental visions, there sprang before her eyes a picture of her future as it must inevitably be, if she told the truth now. The uphill fight for bare existence must begin all over again, the search for work, the dreary lodgings, the insufficient food, the monotony of an existence spent in earning the wherewithal upon which to exist; all these rose before her in startling contrast to the life which would be hers, if she continued to pose as

Rosamund Metcalfe. The difference between the two lives was too overwhelming not to bias her choice; the temptation to choose home, and love, and sheltering care, when they were within her grasp, was greater than she could resist, and the remonstrating voice of conscience was stifled once again. Across the confusion of thoughts in her brain, she heard Mr. Metcalfe's voice speaking to her, but the import of his words did not reach her senses, till he said slowly—

"Then you will come home with me to-day, my dear?"

She dimly realized that he must have repeated the question more than once, as indeed he had done, but the struggle between her conscience, and her desire to grasp the chance of happiness, bewildered her, and she looked into his kind face above her without replying.

"I quite understand, my dear," Mr. Metcalfe said, even more gently than before, "you feel dazed and upset, everything is very strange and trying for you; I fully understand that. But now you must put yourself entirely in my hands. Let me begin to treat you as my daughter at once, and decide for you that you shall come home with me to-day. Are your boxes ready?"

"They will very soon be, but——"

"That's right. And you have no friends here you want to see before you leave?"

"No, oh! no," a startled look leapt into her eyes, "I have no friends anywhere."

"To be sure. I remember you were an orphan when our dear boy met you. You were teaching in a family in South Africa, were you not?"

"Ye—es," Alison faltered, her mind reverting to the letter in Rosamund's box, from which she had gleaned a few scanty details of the dead girl's life, "I have always been a worker, and I have no relations nor friends."

"We must try to make up to you for all you have missed"; the strong cheery voice had a breezy effect upon Alison; "and now, my dear, if you will go and finish your packing, I will order some tea and settle the bill, and then we will get off. There is a train somewhere about five o'clock, and we must catch that train, if we want to be at home for dinner."

There was a lump in Alison's throat as she mounted the stairs again. Since her parents died nobody had ever called her "my dear," and certainly nobody had cared so tenderly for her welfare, or looked at her with such a kindly, fatherly glance as did Mr. Metcalfe. A little sob broke from her as she knelt be-

side her box, and completed her packing, and she whispered passionately—

"God knows I will try to repay all this goodness to me a thousandfold. They shall feel I am their daughter, just as much as if Alison Dering lay in her grave in Southampton,—and I was the real Rosamund."

* * * * *

The small enamelled clock in Mrs. Metcalfe's boudoir was striking seven, when there was a sound of carriage-wheels on the drive, and Mrs. Metcalfe sat up on her couch to listen intently, the colour coming and going on her face, in swift flushes that made her look almost young again.

"Now, ma'am, you won't be tiring yourself overmuch, will you?" said Barbara, her maid,——Barbara, the faithful old servant who had come to Pailsham Hall when her mistress was a young bride, Barbara who had been with the Metcalfes through all their joys and their sorrows, until she was more like a friend, than a servant in the house.

Mrs. Metcalfe smiled faintly, and her eyes looked wistfully up into Barbara's wrinkled face.

"You dear old thing," she said, "I will promise not to do anything foolish; this is such an exciting day, Barbara, that I can't

be sure of not being over tired. Sometimes I feel it cannot be true that Reg's wife is coming home to-night—my boy's wife—my daughter. I do hope and pray we may make her happy with us."

"She'll be hard to please if she isn't happy with you, ma'am," Barbara said quietly, as she moved about the room, lighting the candles and stirring the fire; "this is a home any young lady should be proud and happy to call her own, and Master Reg's wife couldn't but be contented here."

"That was the carriage, Barbara," again Mrs. Metcalfe drew herself up on her couch and leant forward eagerly, "I heard it before when it turned in at the lodge gate,—now it is stopping at the door. I wish I could have been downstairs on the doorstep, to welcome the dear child."

"I wish you could, ma'am, we all wish your could. But you mustn't worry yourself because you can't do it, and nobody could wish for a better place of welcome than this room." Barbara's glance went round the small exquisite boudoir, and Mrs. Metcalfe's eyes followed hers.

"I think it will please her," she said, "it feels like a home-room to me; I want it to give her a sense of home too. It—ah!

there they are," she exclaimed, as voices and footsteps became audible in the corridor, and her door was softly opened. However hurried or impatient he might be, and Mr. Metcalfe was an impetuous man, he never forgot to speak and move softly in his delicate wife's presence, and his voice was very gentle now, as he drew a slight black-robed figure into the room, saying—

"I have brought her back with me, Elinor; our daughter has come to us at last."

Alison had a confused sense of beautiful old furniture, delicately tinted chintzes, and fragrant masses of flowers. But the surroundings seemed to fade into insignificance when she saw the face of the woman on the sofa, and the eager trembling hands held out to greet her. The mother love shining in Mrs. Metcalfe's blue eyes, the welcoming smile that trembled over her lips, the tenderness of the voice that cried—

"My Rose—my dear boy's Rose," these blotted out for the newcomer all other considerations, and she slipped down beside the couch and bowed her head over the outstretched hands, with a sob that came from her very heart.

"I ought not," she stammered, "I ought not to——" The impulse to confess was

struggling within her; she was on the very verge of telling her whole story to the woman who gave her such a loving welcome, when Mrs Metcalfe interrupted her halting sentences.

"My dear, you must never feel you ought not to give way before me," she said, wholly misinterpreting the girl's words; "you and I can understand each other better than anybody else can understand us, we shall have so much to say, so very much to say, and you must never think you have to hide your sorrow from me."

"I"—Alison began again—"you are too good to me, far, far too good," she spoke with vehemence, and, moved perhaps by the pressure of the hands that held hers, she stooped and kissed the elder woman's face, "I can't say——"

"You must not try to say anything to-night," Mrs. Metcalfe again interrupted, her eyes fixed earnestly on Alison's troubled face, "you look tired out, and worried. Barbara shall show you your room, because I cannot show it you myself, and to-night you must think of nothing but resting. To-morrow and all the to-morrows after that, we will talk over everything."

There was an innate strength about Mrs.

Metcalfe, in spite of her delicacy, and this strength made itself instantly felt. At the bidding of that gentle voice, Alison rose from her knees, and moved towards the door, where Barbara was waiting to conduct her to her room, but before she left the boudoir she turned, and looked at the woman on the sofa, saying tremulously—

"You are too good to me—far, far too good. I am not worthy—not worthy"—a little sob prevented her from finishing her sentence, and Mr. Metcalfe broke in with cheery words of common sense.

"Now, my dear, you go with Barbara and see your room and make yourself at home there; but don't talk to-night about gratitude, or anything of the kind. Take care of her, Barbara, she is ours now, and you must take her under your wing, as if she were one of your own chickens."

Barbara made no reply, but the look on her face as her eyes met her master's, was good to see, and with a leap of the heart, Alison recognized what a strong bond of love and loyality must exist between master and servant, when a look like that could pass between them.

"This is a home," she thought as she followed the old maid along the passage, "a

real, beautiful *home*, such as I often have dreamt of, and never knew. I could not give it up now—I could not give it up. God make me worthy of it, and fit to be a part of it."

It was with this prayer in her heart, that Alison Dering entered the room whose door Barbara threw open, and as her eyes fell on the dainty charm of the apartment prepared for her, she uttered an exclamation of delight and surprise, extremely gratifying to the kindly old servant.

"I never dreamt of having a room like this," the girl said quickly, "it is all so perfect, there are flowers everywhere, and I love flowers. I never thought you would all be so good to me." She caught Barbara's hands impulsively, and looked down into the old woman's face, with a smile that was full of infinite sweetness.

"Ah! Miss—ma'am as I ought to say, we cannot be too good to Master Reggie's wife. There isn't one of us but would do anything in the world for you, because you belonged to him."

The glance of the faithful eyes stabbed Alison's soul with fresh remorse, and for a moment the very daintiness and comfort of the room oppressed her; she stirred un-

easily and a flush mounted to her forehead, when the maid went on gently—

"It was Master Reggie and his brother that the Master meant when he talked about my chickens, ma'am. They were as dear to me as ever boys of my own could have been, and when first Master Leonard died, and then Master Reggie, it pretty well broke my heart."

"Who was Master Leonard?" The question nearly rose to Alison's lips, but she fortunately refrained from putting it, remembering just in time that the wife of Reginald Metcalfe would certainly have known the names of his nearest relations. She fell back upon comments on the room, which Mrs. Metcalfe had spared neither thought nor care in making lovely for her daughter-in-law. Whilst Barbara unstrapped, and began to unpack, her box, Alison moved slowly round the room, noting the beauty of each piece of furniture, the artistic excellence of the sketches on the walls, the delicate prettiness of the chintzes that covered couch and chairs. Between the fireplace and window stood an exquisite inlaid writing-table, and before this Alison came to a sudden halt, her eyes fixed, not so much upon the lavish appointments of the table itself, as upon a picture which hung just above it.

This was a large-sized, and singularly striking, photograph of a man, whose age might have been thirty or thereabouts, whose face seemed to Alison to be the epitome of combined sweetness and strength. The steady eyes, beneath a brow of generous breadth and openness, looked straight into her own, with a grave questioning in their glance; but the smile that seemed to hover over the well-cut mouth, took from the gravity of the glance anything that savoured of severity. The pictured face enthralled the girl who stood silently before it; for the space of several seconds, she was speechless, then she turned to the old servant, beginning quickly—

"Who——"

The expression upon Barbara's motherly wrinkled face warned her that she was on dangerous ground again, and no further word escaped her lips, though there was still a question in her eyes, as they looked at the servant.

"Who had that done for you, my dearie?" came the trembling answer to that single word she had said, "I beg your pardon, ma'am, for speaking so familiar to you, but I called you my dearie, the same as I used to call Master Reg, and you are like a part of

him. Who had that picture done for you, you were going to ask me?"

("Oh! but I was not—indeed I was not," the thought flashed through Alison's mind.)

"It was my dear lady thought of it. She thought of everything to make you happier, ma'am, to comfort you. And when we had your message, to say you were leaving the black land—for I call it a black land that stole master Reg from us—when we got your message, she sent the blessèd boy's photograph to be enlarged, so as you should have his dear face watching you all the time."

The quiver that sounded in Alison's voice was neither forced nor unreal, but very genuine, as she said brokenly—

"I don't know how I can ever thank Reg's people enough for all their thought of me. That picture"—she paused, overcome by emotion, Barbara thought, and the old woman touched the young one's arm, with a touch that was in itself a caress.

"There's nothing we wouldn't do for the one Master Reg loved, and made his wife," she said, "there's not a soul in the place but loved him, not one but would cheerfully have given their own life to save his; and you who were his dearest can understand why

we all worshipped the ground his feet walked upon."

"You—who—were—his dearest."

Alison's eyes turned quickly, almost shamefacedly, to the portrait above the writing-table.

"You who were his dearest." The pictured eyes met hers squarely, and it seemed to her there was a reproach in them now, as well as a question; she fancied that the subtle smile on the lips faded slowly, that they set themselves instead into a straight severe line of stern surprise, and disapproval. Barbara's voice broke in upon the confusion of thought and remorse that filled the girl's mind.

"My dear mistress knew that picture would be a comfort to you," she whispered; "each time I come in here and look at it, it seems to comfort me; it seems like as if Master Reginald himself was looking at me: you couldn't wish for a better likeness, could you, ma'am?" she added wistfully, with an evident longing to hear some word of appreciation from Reginald's widow.

Alison's face was dyed with crimson from chin to brow, and her voice had sunk to a whisper, as she answered—

"No—no—indeed. I couldn't wish for anything better; it—it is a beautiful picture—most beautiful." Some strange fascination

seemed to draw her gaze back to it again, she was possessed by a strange longing to justify herself in the sight of those gravely watchful eyes; she felt an absurd desire to explain all that had occurred to the man whose glance held so much of questioning surprise.

"There, ma'am," old Barbara said softly, misinterpreting the emotion in the girl's face, "I won't stop chattering here, worriting you with my silly talk. And the mistress said you were not to trouble to change your dress to-night, but to go down to dinner as you are. I will come back for you presently to show you the way down; and—pray God you may be happy with us, my dearie," she ended in an outburst of tenderness.

Alison turned away from her contemplation of the portrait, and put her hands lightly on the old servant's shoulders.

"Mrs. Metcalfe told me I was not to talk about gratitude," she said, "but I feel as if it was the only thing I could talk about; as if 'thank you—thank you—thank you' were the only words I am capable of saying. Indeed—indeed I shall be happy here, in this beautiful home; if I were not happy I should be the most ungrateful wretch in the world: but I feel as if I had come into a haven of rest, and were safe—at last."

CHAPTER VII

"THE WOMAN MY BOY LOVED"

"AM I like what you expected?" Alison put the question recklessly, with a full consciousness that she was skirting dangerous ground, yet impelled to ask the question in spite of its danger. She and Mrs. Metcalfe were alone together in the elder lady's boudoir, on the morning following her arrival at the Hall, and Alison stood beside the window, looking down upon the couch where her supposed mother-in-law lay. The fitful April sunlight fell upon the slight figure in its simple mourning, gleaming softly on her hair, and bringing into it golden lights that were not usually to be seen there. Her face, too, was in the full light, her eyes met Mrs. Metcalfe's with apparent frankness. She experienced an odd delight in carrying recklessness to its furthest limits, in playing her part to perfection. At her question a puzzled expression crept into

Mrs. Melcalfe's eyes: she hesitated an instant before saying slowly—

"I suppose no one is ever quite what one expects them to be—and, Rosamund, dear, you must not think I am speaking unkindly, if I say that you are not at all like what I expected."

"I wonder," the girl began, paused, caught her breath, then went on rapidly, "I wonder what you did expect me to be like? You never saw my photograph, did you, so that you just had to make up a portrait of me in your mind."

"Yes—I had to make a picture of you, but you know, dear, I had something to draw upon besides my imagination. Reg wrote so much about you, he gave me such graphic descriptions of his 'Rose,' that I felt as if I knew your every feature. But"—Alison tried, and tried successfully to hide the shock these words gave her. Fool that she had been never to foresee this contingency, was the lightning thought in her brain; fool to fancy that she had provided against every mishap, and to overlook such a possibility as this! Why a child might have guessed that a man so deeply in love as Reginald Metcalfe must have been, would most assuredly have written a description to his mother

of his 'Rose of all the world'; the meanest intellect might have grasped this elementary certainty. Yet she, with all her care and forethought, had forgotten so obvious a possibility. But having begun to play a desperate game, she determined to play it out to the end—and summoning up all her histrionic powers, she smiled, and leaving her place by the window, knelt down beside Mrs. Metcalfe.

"You say you thought you knew my every feature—why did you end the sentence with that word 'but'?" On the last two words she dropped her voice, her hand softly stroked Mrs. Metcalfe's thin hand, her eyes still looked frankly into the gentle puzzled eyes.

"I said 'but,' because—my pictures of you were so unlike—so very unlike—the reality. First of all, I thought—you would be younger, Rosamund; Reg has always written of you as if you were scarcely more than a child. Yet you are not a child but—a woman."

"Scarcely more than a child." Before Alison's mind there flashed the vision of a small white face, out of which great blue eyes looked wistfully with the appealing glance of a child; tumbled masses of hair

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that lay round the small face on the pillow like a golden halo, and added to its look of youthfulness; the hand upon the coverlet which seemed too tiny for its heavy wedding-ring!

"Scarcely more than a child." Rosamund Metcalfe had been nothing more than a child, a child to whom the burden of life had come too soon, who had been killed by the burden of sorrow. And now—she, Alison Dering, had usurped the child's place, stolen her name, parodied her personality.

"Sorrow has made you into a woman before your time." The softly spoken words brought Alison's thoughts back with a shock to the exigencies of the present.

"Yes," she answered, "sorrow makes one very old, sorrow—and a hard life, and—my life has always been hard." The note of bitterness which crept into the girl's voice was not unobserved by Mrs. Metcalfe, and she concluded it was due to the disagreeable memories of her days as a governess before Reginald had married her. Had the true picture of Alison's life, lonely, unprotected—an endless struggle with poverty been shown to Mrs. Metcalfe, she would have shrunk from it with horror and dismay. Such a revelation of sorrowful struggling girlhood

was entirely outside her ken. But no conception of any possible deceit ever crossed her mind; her own nature was too upright to be suspicious, and her clasp of Alison's hand was all the closer because of that bitter tone in the girl's voice.

"My dear boy gave you happiness—until the end came?" she said in faltering accents, "your life with him was not hard, was it, dear?"

"No—oh! no," Alison spoke with vehemence, sharply recalled to a remembrance of her part, "life with him—was—was heaven—but I—don't think I can talk about it—even to you—yet."

Mrs. Metcalfe's face fell; Alison's words were a great disappointment to her. In all the weeks that had dragged by since the news of Reg's death had reached them, she had been yearning to talk to her son's widow, aching with the longing to hear more of his life in Africa than letters could tell her; to know more of his marriage and his home than he had been able to put into words. And now her hopes fell to the ground. Reg's widow could not bear to talk of her husband, and of their life together, and the heart of Reg's mother must perforce be unsatisfied.

Alison had foreseen the request just prof-

fered by Mrs. Metcalfe, the request for some account of her son and his life in the African wilds, and her answer was the outcome of deep thought and preparation. As it was obviously impossible that she should be able to tell a story of Reginald and Rosamund that would bear any relation to facts, especially facts which must have been set forth in Reginald's own letters, she determined to refuse to say anything. She had thought it would be very easy to feign a sorrow that could not endure to speak of the happy past, and only Mrs. Metcalfe's look of profound disappointment roused her to a sense of what her silence must mean to the dead man's mother. In genuine, and not feigned, emotion she bent down to kiss the troubled face on the couch.

"I can't bear to make you look or feel unhappy," she exclaimed, "and—I—I know how you must want to hear everything; but —I cannot talk much yet; indeed I cannot."

"I am a selfish old woman," Mrs. Metcalfe answered, and if her voice still shook, her eyes were brave; "you shall not say a word more than you wish, my dear daughter; perhaps some day, when everything is less fresh in your mind, you will be able to tell me more."

"Perhaps—some day," Alison said, her eyes turning restlessly away from the quiet gaze fixed upon her, "but you won't expect too much of me, will you? You see already my appearance has disappointed you. I do not look like what you expected. You may find me altogether different, quite different from what you thought I should be. I am sure I shall never come up to your expectations, never, never."

She spoke with such vehemence that a startled look crossed Mrs. Metcalfe's face, and she touched the girl's hair with soothing fingers, saying softly—

"You must not feel so strongly about what I said, dear. I only meant that your face and hair were not what I had been picturing them. You yourself will be all that my dear boy told me, of that I am quite confident."

"Don't be too confident," Alison said excitedly, "you must not be too sure I shall be in the least like what he said. He—he must have exaggerated my good points, and forgotten my bad ones. You will really find me quite different. What did he tell you about my face—and—my hair?"

Again that vision of the golden-haired girl upon the pillow rose before her, and there was a curiously strained look in her eyes as

she fixed them on Mrs. Metcalfe, who was watching her thoughtfully.

"He spoke so much of your fairness," the elder lady answered slowly, "he so often called you his white rose, and—of course it is quite true that you are curiously white, but not with the whiteness of ill health. Reggie's White Rose," she murmured dreamily, then rousing herself, she continued, "and my boy told me your eyes were blue and your hair like sunshine—but——"

"I think he must have used a lover's licence," Alison broke in abruptly, with a little laugh, which to her own ears sounded unreal and strange, "my eyes are grey, they have always been grey—I cannot pretend that I ever had blue eyes."

"Blue as the skies in summer," Reg called them," Mrs. Metcalfe replied, that dreamy note in her voice again; "he wrote once that they made him think of forget-me-nots in the meadows."

The picture that had persistently haunted Alison throughout this conversation, flashed before her again with startling vividness.

"Blue as skies in summer, blue as forget-me-nots in the meadows." Yes—those eyes that had looked at her wistfully out of Rosamund Metcalfe's white face had been

brilliantly, brightly blue, as different from her grey eyes as could possibly be conceived.

"My eyes have never been blue," she repeated mechanically, "and I don't think my hair was ever really like sunshine: only sometimes it has gleams of gold when the sun shines upon it. Perhaps——"

"Perhaps the sun was shining upon it when Reg wrote to me," Mrs. Metcalfe said with a smile and a sigh; "he loved you so dearly, Rosamund, that he painted you as his heart pictured you. I think I——" she paused and her eyes were fixed so earnestly upon Alison that a great dread fell upon the girl lest her secret should have been discovered. But after that pause the elder woman resumed tranquilly, "I think I like you best, dear, with your grey eyes, and the soft dark hair that has golden gleams in the sunlight. Whatever you had been like I should have loved you, because you are the woman my boy loved, but for myself, I am glad you are not quite what I had imagined you to be, a blue-eyed, golden-haired child!"

Alison drew a long breath of relief: the worst was over. The tension she had been enduring ever since the talk with Mrs. Metcalfe began, relaxed at last, the eyes of the invalid on her, clear and far-seeing though

they were, had not penetrated the truth, or discovered her fraud. For the present at least she was safe ; and she realized that her life now, and for a long time to come, must be one of living in the present, a moment at a time, looking neither before nor behind, but sweeping aside the past, and letting the future rest on the knees of the Gods.

CHAPTER VIII

"WIDOW INDEED!"

"AND have you heard anything of that nice Miss Dering since she left you, Mrs. Jennings?" Doctor Trenchard took up his hat and gloves from the table in the landlady's sitting-room, and nodded a kindly farewell to the Jennings' only daughter, a dressmaker's assistant at home for a holiday, and in the doctor's hands for treatment.

"Well now, I am glad you mentioned Miss Dering, doctor," Mrs. Jennings answered, "for I've been more than a bit surprised only to have heard from her once. She seemed to go away so sudden, and to go right away, too, in such a strange sort of fashion; not but what she wrote that once, and she paid every halfpenny she owed me, before ever she left at all."

"She went to the relations of that poor pretty girl who died here, didn't she? What was that girl's name? I have quite forgotten

it—such a pretty pathetic little thing she was, it seemed terrible that she should have died amongst strangers."

"Metcalfe her name was," Mrs. Jennings said; "often and often I've sat here and wondered why none of the family have been near the place—not to see the house where she died, nor her grave, nor nothing."

"But are you sure they have not been here? After all they might have gone to the cemetery, without coming to this house."

"There's nothing in this world as we can be sure about, and that I very well know," Mrs. Jennings answered with a wise shake of her head, "but all I know is, they've never been near me, and you'd think they might want to ask me a few questions, not to mention asking Jennings about her last days on board ship. Why, Jennings, he could tell them more about her than anybody, and they haven't never written to him, nor come to see him. Oh! I've thought it strange many and many a time, but, there! the ways of the upper ten is past finding out, and that's the truth."

"I hope all your kindness to the poor thing was not forgotten by her family," Doctor Trenchard said gravely, pausing by the door and looking thoughtfully into Mrs.

Jennings' rather aggrieved face. "You have surely heard from them, or from some one connected with them. They very thoughtfully sent me my fee through Miss Dering, in the first letter they wrote to her."

"Oh! I've no cause to complain—not so far as the money goes. They must have taken a wonderful fancy to Miss Dering, for they seem to have done everything through her. Of course you asked her to write to them, and she wrote right enough, and she got an answer—there's no manner of doubt but what they sent her plenty of money too, for she paid for the funeral, and she paid me—and there was no stint, as you might say, anywhere. I suppose they sent her a post-office order," she added thoughtfully, "for I don't see where she could have cashed a cheque."

Both Mrs. Jennings and the doctor would have been greatly surprised had they known of that visit to the pawnbroker, by which Alison had raised the sums required; nor would their mystification have been diminished, if they had seen the letter received by that same pawnbroker a week after Alison Dering's departure from Southampton: a letter, signed Rosamund Metcalfe, enclosing money sufficient to redeem all those articles

of jewellery, which had been so recently deposited with him. But the doctor and the landlady, being wholly ignorant of all these proceedings, did not doubt that Alison had received the money from the Metcalfe family, —and Doctor Trenchard answered Mrs. Jennings' last remark with the words—

"I hope these people were kind to Miss Dering herself; she was very good to the girl who died, and after all the poor thing had no claims upon her. Did she find any work, do you know? What became of her?"

"I know no more than Adam, doctor—and it vexes me a bit at times to think she's only written to me that once, when I'd tried to help her, and not press her for the rent nor anything. She did her duty by me, paying up and saying thank you, and all that, and I've got nothing against her, you understand. But I did think she might have told me what she was doing, and where she went after she left the Metcalfes."

"She went to them first?" Doctor Trenchard was something of a gossip, not above chattering to the loquacious landlady when he had time to spare, and he had been both interested and impressed by Alison Dering's quiet capability.

"She went from here straight to London. That I do know," said Mrs. Jennings, totally unaware that her knowledge was exceedingly faulty, "and she gave me a London address, which I should say was Mr. Metcalfe's, seeing she was to go to them and take the poor young lady's things, and tell them the whole story. She wrote to me once from that address, telling me how kind they were to her, and sending me a nice message from Mr. Metcalfe, and then she never wrote again."

"But you have her address," Doctor Trenchard persisted, hardly knowing why he was pressing the point so persistently.

"Yes—I had the address, but she couldn't have stopped at it long, for I wrote to her a matter of a month ago, and my own letter came back marked, 'Not known.' She's got into work somewhere you may be sure, and forgotten all about us."

"The way of the world," Doctor Trenchard said with a shrug of the shoulders. "Well, well, I always meant to ask you about Miss Dering, and always forgot until to-day. Give your daughter plenty of milk, and make her be out in the fresh air as much as possible. She will soon be all right, and if you can hear or see anything of Miss Dering, let me know."

"I should like to know what that girl's

fortune will be," he mused, as he went down Mrs. Jennings' steps, and along the street. "She struck me as being rather unusually clever, with uncommon strength of character. She might do something very fine, or go utterly to the bad: the sort of woman who would stick at nothing to attain an object."

Under Doctor Trenchard's grey hair there was a very shrewd brain, and he was no mean judge of character; the character of the girl who had lodged with Mrs. Jennings had interested him profoundly. He felt distinct satisfaction, therefore, when, a few days later, Mrs. Jennings meeting him in the street, stopped him, and greeted him with the words—

"It's funny how, if you get talking about a person, you're sure to hear something of that person pretty soon. Now, there's Miss Dering——"

"Have you heard anything of her?" the doctor interrupted quickly. "Has she written to tell you about her work?"

"Not she," Mrs. Jennings gave vent to a very audible, and snort-like sniff. "She's a fat lot too grand to tell me about her affairs now, or even to know me by sight when she sees me."

"Have you seen her, then?" Doctor Trenchard spoke eagerly; his former con-

versation with Mrs. Jennings had roused afresh all his interest in Miss Dering, and the landlady's evident vexation piqued his curiosity

"Yes—I've seen her, and she've seen me, though she stared as straight as if for all the world I was a glass window, and she was looking right through me. Pretended not to know me, that was her little game."

"But was she here?"

"Here? Lor! no. Me and 'Tildy was in London. I took her back after her holiday, and much better she was too with all the medicine you gave her, and the milk and stuff I put into her. So, there being a cheap excursion, I went up to London for the day, being wishful to see my married sister, and the dressmaker where 'Tildy works. And going along one of them streets, so stuffed with people you had to keep pushing them away all the time to get to see a shop yourself, who should we run into but Miss Dering—walking with a gentleman, elderly and very distinguished—but Miss Dering——"

"There was nothing strange about that," Doctor Trenchard put in, Mrs. Jennings' tones, rather than her actual words, moving him to speak; "perhaps the gentleman was a relation."

"Not he," Mrs. Jennings sniffed again, "why she's told me times without number that she hasn't a relation in the world: told me over and over again that her parents died when she was a little girl, and she'd always had to face the world alone. But there she was, as well dressed as you please, and in deep mourning too!"

The tone expressed the deepest disgust, and Doctor Trenchard laughed. "Come, come," he said, "there is surely no harm in wearing mourning. Perhaps Miss Dering has lost a relation, or—or a friend."

"Deep mourning," repeated Mrs. Jennings, "and handsome mourning. It all cost a pretty penny you may believe me, doctor, for I totted it up in my mind when I'd got past her, and I tell you she hasn't got any relations!" And though seeing her look so well dressed and all that, took me back a bit, still I went straight up to her, and I said—'Why, Miss Dering, it's never you!' and would you believe it, she started most violent, and then she looked me straight in the face, and said as coolly as you please, 'I think you must have made a mistake, that is not my name.' Did you ever?"

"Possibly you did really mistake another lady for Miss Dering," the doctor said soothingly.

"Not me," was the indignant retort, "it wasn't likely I'd mistake some one that had lived in my house as long as Miss Dering did. That was her right enough, but she's got too grand to know old friends, and I was so taken all of a heap, that I couldn't find breath to say another word till after she'd gone right on up the street. And then I can tell you I let fly to 'Tildy."

"And what did your daughter say?" asked Doctor Trenchard, much amused.

"She said I must have made a mistake, and she would have it the lady I spoke to was a widow, which I say she was not. All the widows I have ever known wear decent widow's bonnets, and this lady had got on a hat, and nothing of the widow about her, unless you count her collar and cuffs, which was what 'Tildy was going by. Widow indeed!"

"Well, if it *was* Miss Dering whom you saw, I am sorry she should have treated an old friend unkindly, but I cannot help still hoping that you were mistaken. Miss Dering never struck me as being the kind of person who would treat anybody unkindly."

"Ah! she isn't the first I've been deceived in, and I daresay she won't be the last," Mrs. Jennings replied lugubriously, "Miss Dering she's taken up with finer folks than me, and

she's ashamed of knowing me and that's it and all about it."

The encounter in Regent Street which so upset Mrs. Jennings, had a scarcely less upsetting effect upon Alison herself. To treat Mrs. Jennings as a total stranger, was her first instinct of self-defence, an instinct followed on the impulse of the moment; but such treatment of an old friend was repugnant to her naturally kindly character. With Mr. Metcalfe beside her, it would have been suicidal to have responded to the name of Dering, by which Mrs. Jennings so eagerly greeted her, and her supposed father-in-law's look and question of surprise gave her warning that she must be on her guard. But not only did she intensely dislike hurting Mrs. Jennings' feelings, as that lady's expressive face at once showed her that she had done; she also felt that a new element of fear was added to her existence. If, at any time in a London street, she was liable to come across somebody out of her past, the past that was already beginning to look so shadowy—in what an intolerable atmosphere of dread she would perforce live. In the quiet country-side at Minley she had grown so accustomed to her new life and her new home, that all her former existence had begun to feel like a

dream. She no longer started when she was addressed as Mrs. Metcalfe; she no longer failed to answer when spoken to as Rosamund; she had so wholly adapted herself to another woman's circumstances, that she had almost begun to feel she must really be that woman. And now she had received a shock. After the encounter with Mrs. Jennings, she realized that at any moment the fabric she had so carefully raised might fall about her ears, leaving for her only desolation, and an outer darkness, at the bare thought of which she shuddered.

Pailsham Hall, the first true home she had known since her early childhood, had begun to grow so dear to her, that to leave it would be a wrench she did not care to contemplate; whilst at the same time, the lofty ideals of life and conduct which made the Metcalfe's dwelling the beautiful and serene place it was, filled her with a remorseful sense of how far she fell short of those high ideals. The comfort and ease of her present existence could not fail to appeal to the girl, who for so many years had been earning her bread, in the thankless position, first of office girl, and then as companion secretary. When engaged in the latter work, she had found that her employers belonged invariably to that

class of person who consider that paid service may be treated with scant kindness, and that a worker is merely a machine.

As she looked round her dainty room at the Hall, Alison often recalled other rooms in which she had slept, rooms that were thought "good enough for a companion secretary," small slips of garrets, scantily furnished, and with sloping ceilings; tiny dressing-rooms without fireplaces; and in one case, an apartment which could scarcely be looked upon as of more importance than a cupboard.

Without being in the least unduly luxurious, Alison appreciated, nay, revelled in the luxury that now surrounded her, and she was young enough to enjoy it frankly and undisguisedly. But she enjoyed and appreciated, besides, all that lay deeper than the merely material advantages showered upon her by the Metcalfes. Everything that was best and loftiest in her responded to the nobility of Mr. Metcalfe's character, to Mrs. Metcalfe's gentle yet strong nature. The material benefits of her new position sank gradually into insignificance, as she realized, with ever increasing force, what it should mean to any woman to live in an atmosphere of such true yet unobtrusive goodness.

"It makes one feel better to be with people like these," she thought, as she sat beside the writing-table in her room, one July evening, "they never talk in a goody way, and yet you feel their goodness in everything they do and say. They look at the whole of life from the highest standpoint; they don't ever seem to think of what is expedient, only of what is right—whilst I——"

Her thoughts broke off in the remorseful confusion which so often ended her meditations, her eyes fixed themselves upon the portrait of Reginald Metcalfe, which looked gravely down upon her.

"I wonder if you would hate me and despise me?" she whispered, as the steadfast eyes of the picture seemed to meet hers; "perhaps you wouldn't be so severe upon me if you knew how dreadfully hard it is to be a woman, and above all a woman out of work. It was such a temptation, such a big temptation, to stretch out my hand and snatch at this chance. I think you would forgive me if you knew how great the temptation was, and how near I was to despair."

Alison had learnt to look upon the portrait of Rosamund Metcalfe's husband as the portrait of a dear and valued friend; her first shrinking from the searching glance of Regi-

nald's eyes had given place to a strange certainty that the eyes looked at her, not with upbraiding, but with understanding and sympathy. She had grown into a habit of sitting down before the picture, and looking earnestly into the strong quiet face; sometimes even speaking to it, as though it were an actual living presence, with whom she could converse. In some odd fashion this habit had become a real comfort and help to her; and she had a curious certainty that the man in the picture was her friend.

When Mrs. Metcalfe asked her tremulously if she liked "dear Reg's portrait," she was able to answer with absolute truthfulness that she liked it immensely; and a few weeks later she had told her supposed mother-in-law, with equal truth, that no words could express what the portrait meant to her.

Reginald knew; Reginald understood; Reginald—she thought—nay, she was sure, that Reginald forgave; and with these certainties she quieted the voice of conscience; telling herself that as long as she tried to live a life as Reginald's wife would have lived—as long as she was a true and loving daughter to Reginald's father and mother, her sin was, after all, no sin at all!

CHAPTER IX

AN OLD FRIEND!

"I SEE what you mean, Elinor, but I do not agree with you."

The words were spoken in tones of one too sure of her own opinions to brook either contradiction, or even mild argument, and Mrs. Metcalfe, with the wisdom of long experience, made no reply to the remark.

"I do not in the least agree with you," the speaker went on, with an increase of emphasis. "I am very sorry for a widow; I am a widow myself, and I know perfectly well what it feels like. I am not unsympathetic, but there are limits to everything, and there is a limit to the time in which a widow should sit and weep, and shut herself away from the world. Reginald's widow is no worse off than others; it is quite time she came out of her shell, and saw people."

"Quite so, Grace, Rosamund and I both felt that the time had come when she should

take up ordinary life again; and it was for this reason that we arranged our present small house party. We asked you and Hubert to come a few days before other people arrived, because I thought you would like to have a quiet opportunity of getting to know our dear Rose."

Mrs. Ralph Metcalfe looked at her sister-in-law, and smiled, a not wholly pleasant smile; she had never either liked or approved of the mistress of Pailsham Hall, regarding her as silly, sentimental, and totally lacking in worldly common sense. She herself was too wholly compounded of practical and unvarnished worldliness, to be able even to begin to understand Elinor Metcalfe's beautiful nature; and at the present moment she was feeling vexed and sore, because her annual visit to Pailsham had been postponed from June to September, out of consideration for Reginald's young widow.

The seclusion in which the Metcalfes had allowed Rosamund to remain during the summer, was, in her opinion, absurd and uncalled for, and to her son Hubert she had waxed almost eloquent over what she had called this ridiculous cosetting and fussing. She had not been able to refrain from expressing something of what she felt to Mrs.

Metcalfe herself, when, on her arrival at the Hall, she was taken to that lady's boudoir—and her sister-in-law's gentle explanations did not mollify her in the least degree.

"We naturally wish to know Rosamund," she said, in the tart tones which never failed to make Mrs. Metcalfe's heart sink; "I was very much surprised and disappointed when she refused to come to us in July; and I must repeat, Elinor, that I think your putting off our visit here was really quite unnecessary. *We* could have come quietly, as usual, the house party could have been postponed."

Lying on her couch, Mrs. Metcalfe was unable to draw herself up, but as she replied, there was a certain frigidity in her voice, which equally served her purpose.

"I am sorry for your disappointment, Grace," she said, "but my husband and I thought it best to allow Rosamund a perfectly quiet time in which to face life again."

The dignity of the words and tone had an effect upon Mrs. Ralph Metcalfe which no sharp retort would have done; she understood that in her anxiety to assert her position as mother of the heir to the Metcalfe estates she had overstepped the bounds of good taste, and a dull flush showed through her wrinkled brown skin.

"Well, of course I did not mean to interfere with your arrangements, Elinor," she answered, with a rather lame attempt at apology, "you must do as you please in your own house, but I must say I believe in rousing people from their sorrows as soon as possible. Brooding never did anybody any good yet, and it is never likely to do any good."

"Rosamund is not a person who broods," Mrs. Metcalfe answered with a smile. "I am sorry she is not in to greet you; she fully intended to have been here when you and Hubert arrived, but she must have rambled further than she meant to do. Perhaps Stanley and Hubert will meet her."

"Oh! she rambles about, does she?" the other lady asked, with a tone in the words which implied that rambling was, if not a crime, at least something of which to disapprove.

"She loves the country," Mrs. Metcalfe answered, "and she has always lived so much in London, that she delights in our lanes and commons."

"In London? Did you say she had lived in London? I thought Reg met her in Africa; surely she was teaching out there?"

"Yes—he met her there. But before she went to Africa, she lived and worked in

London; she has had a very hard life; and it makes us all the more glad to give her a happy, restful time now."

"And you like her? You are pleased with Reg's choice?"

"Oh! yes," Reginald's mother spoke with a soft smile, "I don't think I ever doubted that I should love the wife my dear boy chose, and Rose has more than fulfilled all my expectations. She is older than I had imagined, more of a woman; and a perfect companion to me. In her I have found the daughter I have so often longed for."

Mrs. Ralph smiled, a superior, almost pitying smile.

"If she is so very charming, you are not likely to keep her long, Elinor, she will probably marry again. These fascinating young widows always do." At the tactless remark, a faint tinge of colour crept into the invalid's face, and her hands stirred a little; but her voice was very quiet; she had learnt self-control in the difficult school of suffering, and that control seldom deserted her.

"Neither Stanley nor I would stand in the dear child's way, if she wished to marry again," she said, "but I am sure that at present nothing is further from her thoughts. She was wrapped up in Reg; his death was

a most terrible shock to her; even now she cannot bear to talk of Africa, or of the life there."

"Now that is quite absurd," Mrs. Ralph answered in her brisk, hard voice, "and you ought not to encourage morbid sentiment of such a description. Rosamund should make up her mind on principle to talk about Africa; the longer she puts off speaking of it, the worse it will be for her."

"I do not like to press her," Mrs. Metcalfe began, but her sister in-law continued speaking, as though she had not heard the interruption.

"To my mind, trouble is very like a carriage accident. If you have an accident, you had better drive again as soon as you can, or you will lose your nerve altogether; and it is the same with trouble. If you put off talking about it, it makes it ten thousand times harder when you have to begin. I am sure of that."

Mrs. Metcalfe looked nervously into her guest's hard face.

"I should not like Rose to be upset," she said, "and if you don't mind, Grace, I really think it would be better to avoid the subject of Africa. The dear girl is very plucky and good, she has tried in every way, to set aside

her own sorrow and to be bright for our sakes ; and it would grieve me very much if, by asking her questions about her African life, old wounds were opened afresh."

" My dear Elinor, you can rely on my tact and judgment," Mrs. Ralph said majestically, whilst her sister in law wondered whether she understood even the elementary meaning of the word " tact ": " you may be quite sure that I, a widow, would never hurt a widow's feelings. I can understand accurately what Rosamund feels, but there are right ways and wrong ways of feeling things."

Her hostess opened her mouth to reply to this startling statement, when the door opened and Alison came into the room. On the threshold she paused, her eyes looking swiftly from Mrs. Metcalfe to the visitor, with that instinctively watchful glance which had become habitual to her, since she entered upon a life that so eminently needed care and caution. From the day when she had met Mrs. Jennings in Regent Street, she had been haunted by a fear that somebody else who had known her under her other name, would come across her in her new existence ; and there was a certain alert caution in her very glance, which to a close observer must have

recalled the cautious alertness of an animal in danger.

Seeing that a total stranger sat in the boudoir, the watchful look died out of Alison's eyes; she hesitated no longer than that fraction of a second, but advanced across the room towards the visitor, whilst Mrs. Metcalfe said quietly—

"I am glad you have come in, Rosamund, my sister in law arrived half an hour ago. Grace—this is our dear daughter—Reginald's Rosamund." Mrs. Metcalfe rose stiffly from her chair, and held out a cheek for Alison to kiss, saying as she did so—

"I am glad to make your acquaintance, and I am glad, too, to see that you are able to enjoy country walks; you don't shut yourself up too much."

"Oh! I love country walks—I am so happy here—I—" Alison began impetuously, when the surprise in the small eyes watching her, checked her eager utterance. A remembrance of the rôle she ought to be playing rushed back to her mind, the flush faded from her face, she glanced uneasily away from the shrewd questioning in Mrs. Ralph's glance—"the country is so peaceful," she ended lamely, "so—so quiet."

"I daresay Central Africa was very *quiet*

too," the elder lady answered, her eyes still fixed on the girl; "it must have been quite a wilderness."

Mrs. Metcalfe raised herself on her sofa, and looked imploringly from her sister-in-law, to Alison's troubled face, on which the colour came and went quickly.

"We will not talk about Africa now, Grace," she said gently but firmly, "Rosamund and I prefer not to discuss it. Now, Rose, darling," she added, smiling up into the girl's wistful eyes, "come and sit down by me, and have your tea. I see you have been up the hill," and her glance rested smilingly on the great bunch of heather in Alison's hand.

A grateful glance shot from those troubled eyes towards Mrs. Metcalfe's gentle face, and Alison stooped impulsively to kiss the invalid, saying, as she did so—

"I could not help going right up the hill to day; the heather is like a sheet of purple, and oh! I wish I could take you up there to see the view from the top. It is the most beautiful view I have ever seen."

"Dear me," Mrs. Ralph exclaimed, "I am surprised to hear you say that. I should have thought a person who has travelled as much as you have done, would not have had

to wait to come to Surrey to see the most beautiful view in the world ! "

The startled look which had left Alison's eyes, came back to them, she turned sharply away from the couch, and with fingers that visibly trembled, began to arrange the heather in a bowl upon the low bookcase. A look of intense annoyance swept over Mrs. Metcalfe's face ; Alison's agitation did not escape her observation, and though she naturally did not attribute it to its true cause, vexation at what she considered wilful obstinacy on the part of her sister-in-law, made her say quickly—

" We will not discuss travels now, Grace. Rosamund, my dear, come and sit here by me, and tell me if you managed to see any of our poor folk during your walk."

The decided change of subject, reduced Mrs. Ralph to silence, but whilst Mrs. Metcalfe and Alison talked over some of their humble friends in the village, she leant back in her chair, and looked at the girl with furtive, yet searching glances.

" Pretty enough," was her mental verdict, " and with a good deal of fascination. If Stanley intends to leave his son's widow a large share of his money, Hubert might do worse than take a fancy to her ; only one

never knows what kind of person is likely to attract Hubert."

She had arrived at this point in her meditations, when a sound of voices in the corridor was followed by the entrance of Mr. Metcalfe and his nephew Hubert: and no greater contrast could be imagined than that which existed between the two men. As Alison shook hands with the newcomer, her thoughts flew swiftly to the pictured face above her writing-table, and her heart throbbed with pity for the Squire. What must his feelings be, every time he looked at his nephew, and remembered his dead son? How was it possible to him to be so gentle and courteous to this man who had stepped into Reginald's shoes—this insignificant man who turned to her with furtively admiring eyes, and slow caressing smile; whose insignificant features, full yet obstinate lips, and low forehead, gave a true index to his character.

"My daughter-in-law—my nephew, Hubert," Mr. Metcalfe made them known to one another, and as Hubert shook hands with her, Alison shrank back a little, feeling an unaccountable loathing for the close clinging clasp of the young man's hand.

"Hubert and I have been strolling down to Bricker's Copse," said the Squire, sinking

into a chair by his wife's side, and sighing wearily; "I wanted him to see some of the alterations I propose making there, and the bit of meadow I think of selling to Farmer Hoare. He agrees with me that——"

"I entirely agree," Hubert broke in, "I should agree with anything Uncle Stanley suggested about cutting down trees, and selling land. I don't profess to know anything on either subject, and I can trust him to do his best for the estate, and for me." He laughed a short cackling laugh which gave Alison a sudden wish to strike his complacent face; and the pained expression that all at once looked out of the Squire's kindly eyes made her heart ache for the old man.

"Oh! I'm not likely to quarrel with my uncle over the management of the property," Hubert continued; "I don't suppose there is a better managed estate anywhere in the world. I am sure you will agree with me, Rosamund."

Alison flushed hotly. The hint at cousinly intimacy in the use of her Christian name; the scarcely veiled admiration in his light eyes; and the fatuous smile with which he regarded her, combined to emphasize her first instinctive dislike for Mr. Metcalfe's heir.

Again there flashed unbidden before her mind a memory of Reginald's face as she knew it in the picture, the strong quiet face whose steadfast eyes still had power to move her conscience to remorse; and during the days that followed the Ralph Metcalfes' coming, remorse was one of her most predominant sensations.

The very fact that the Squire and his wife clung to her as to a real daughter, served to quicken her pangs of conscience; whilst the sight of Hubert taking Reginald's place, and playing the part of heir with evident gusto, and with no realization of what Mr. and Mrs. Metcalfe must be feeling, added to the depth of her remorse for the fraud she was herself practising upon the old people. And yet it seemed to her that it was impossible now to recede from the position she had taken up. Many and many a time wild ideas of confession crossed her mind: but the very real affection bestowed upon her by both her supposed parents-in-law, and the certainty that they leant upon her in a variety of ways, prevented her from actually making the confession that so often hung upon her lips. For both Mrs. Ralph and her son, she conceived a whole-hearted dislike, a dislike which, as she instinctively felt, was shared

by the Squire and his wife, albeit they were unfailingly courteous and gracious to their guests. Towards Hubert, Alison's dislike almost amounted to loathing, the more so that his first admiration of her became increasingly pronounced every day. The admiration was fostered by his mother, who, foreseeing that the Squire's daughter-in-law was likely to become possessed of a large share of his wealth—encouraged her son to woo, and if possible to win, his cousin's young widow.

"Remember," she said to Hubert one evening, when he had come into her dressing-room for a final chat before going to his room, "remember that though, thanks to poor dear Reginald's death, you inherit the estates, Stanley can leave as much money as he chooses to Rosamund; and Elinor can leave every penny of her big fortune to her daughter-in-law. Therefore, my dear boy, Rosamund may certainly be looked upon as an heiress, and——"

"And you would like her for *your* daughter-in-law, eh! mother?" Hubert asked, with the fatuous, cackling laugh that had already begun to affect Alison's nerves. "Well! I'm not opposed to the idea, very much the reverse. I think Rosamund ab-

solutely charming—Reg had good taste, poor beggar, I will say that for him—and I see no reason why I should not persuade his widow to marry me." He glanced at his own face in the glass, and tenderly smoothing his small moustache, gazed admiringly at his insignificant reflection.

"She is very attractive," his mother said slowly, "she will probably be extremely rich —and you——"

"I am only too ready and willing to marry her," Hubert answered with eagerness, "and it isn't her money I care about either," he added with the self-approving air of one who feels himself unusually entitled to approbation; "there is something about Rosamund which makes you feel you would like to have her on any terms. By Jove, Mater, I would marry that girl if she was a simple nobody, and hadn't a penny in the world!"

"Fortunately she will have a good many pennies, and thanks to being Reginald's widow, she is quite an important person," was the dry retort; "she was nobody in particular when Reg married her—just a governess in Natal; but the widow of Reginald Metcalfe is a very different person from plain Rosamund Hensdon, however charming Rosamund Hensdon may have been."

"By the way," Hubert exclaimed suddenly, "talking of Rosamund Hensdon—I met Stephen Rambert in town just before we came down here, and I began talking casually about Reg and his wife, and he told me he had known Miss Hensdon, before she married Reg. I must ask Rosamund if she remembers him. He is coming down to this part of the world next week, to stay at Cool Ash; I shall ask my uncle if we can have him over here. He and Rosamund may like to talk over old times, and old friends; yes, we must certainly get the old uncle to have him over here to please Rosamund. I'm so glad I remembered about meeting him. Until this moment I had totally forgotten it, and of course Rosamund will be delighted to meet an old friend!"

CHAPTER X

HUBERT'S WOOING

HIS friend, Stephen Rambert, and their conversation together, recurred to Hubert the day following his talk with his mother, and the recollection of it was full in his mind when he met Alison in the garden after he had finished his late breakfast. Hubert never appeared downstairs until the rest of the party had entirely finished their morning meal, and by the time he reached the garden, Alison had already been out there for more than an hour, gathering flowers for the vases which were her especial charge, chatting to her devoted friend Barnes, the head-gardener, and exercising her constant companions, Tim and Jock, the Aberdeen terriers. When Hubert caught sight of her she was strolling down a broad path raised a little above the lawn, skirting a south wall against whose warm red bricks clusters of

fragrant roses and purple clematis opened their flowers to the sunshine. In the wide border, hollyhocks, stately and tall, and golden blossomed sunflowers made a background for the pale stars of the Michaelmas daisies; and although September had already begun, clumps of sweet peas, rose-coloured, lilac and white, well sheltered by the old brick wall, still filled the air with their sweetness.

Tim and Jock made noble efforts to enjoy themselves in the chastened fashion which their mistress appeared to advocate, whereas inclination would have led them to search for possible rats and rabbits in that deliriously beguiling flower bed, or to scrape holes in the gravel path with the paws that seemed to have been created for such enchanting work. They walked one on either side of Alison, heads erect, ears cocked, small bodies bristling with suppressed eagerness, eyes alert and shining. There was always a chance, a remote chance, that some fascinating amusement might turn up, even during the dreary pursuit of walking round the garden, and the dogs were invariably ready for every chance. When Alison paused to pick her flowers, they paused too, watching her every movement with the loving glance of un-

swerving devotion and loyal surrender, of which only a dog is capable.

"You dear little souls," she exclaimed with a laugh, as she stopped beside a great clump of sweet peas, and the dogs sat squarely down by her side, "as a reward for being so angelic, you shall both come out on the heather this afternoon, and enjoy yourselves in your own way—instead of mine. There!"

Both tails flopped heavily, both pairs of ears jerked eagerly; if Tim and Jock did not actually understand the language of humans, they made a very fair show of doing so, and Alison, laughing again, laid a caressing hand first on one rough bronzed head, then on the other.

"The dogs have taken to you, Rosamund," Hubert's voice behind her made her start and turn quickly, and the Aberdeens sprang to their feet and stood at attention, their eyes looking at the newcomer with no friendliness of glance, for Hubert was not a favourite with the animals.

"The dogs and I are mutual friends," Alison said coolly; she cordially sympathized with the dogs' dislike of this man, and her own heart echoed it: "they knew that I loved them from the very first."

"Poor Reg was awfully fond of them, wasn't he?" Hubert answered, "I daresay he told you about these dogs. They were his shadows, just as they are yours."

"Yes"—Alison spoke hurriedly, and moved on along the terrace, "so Mrs. Metcalfe told me; he—he loved all animals, and they loved him."

From Reginald's mother, Reginald's supposed widow had learnt many details about the dead man, and his tastes and qualities, and although her heart beat fast as she sauntered on beside Hubert, her voice was calm and well under control.

"Funny how these people who are so fond of animals should yet be so fond, too, of killing them," Hubert answered; "now you couldn't have had a truer sportsman than poor Reg, as of course you know—yet these dogs adored him and he them—and he was idiotically fond of his horses."

Alison had time to wonder at herself for the sudden flame of anger that shot up within her at Hubert's half contemptuous tone, before she answered—

"Yes, he was devoted to his horses, in fact, to all horses; I think he was good to every living creature," she added, almost under her breath, as a vivid remembrance of

Reginald's face swept into her mind, and she recalled the gravely tender look of the pictured eyes she had grown accustomed to meet day after day. At first it had seemed to her that those eyes watched her with stern disapproval and rebuke, but of late it had pleased her to fancy that the sternness had vanished, to be replaced by that grave tenderness, that look of kindly friendship, which haunted her now.

"Poor old Reg, he was a rare good chap," Hubert said quickly, and in his voice was a note of sympathy for which Alison had scarcely given him credit. "You know, Rosamund, I do feel awfully sorry for you, and I only wish I could make it a bit easier."

Again there was a note of genuine sympathy in his voice, and Alison felt remorsefully that perhaps she had been unjust to him, and that she had no real grounds for the dislike he had aroused in her. There was a soft gratitude in the eyes she lifted to his face, possibly some of her remorseful sense of having misjudged him showed in them, for Hubert stopped suddenly in the middle of the path, and said abruptly—

"I say, I wish you would tell me why you don't like me. You know I like you most tremendously, Rosamund; I daresay I've shown you that pretty plainly, and by Jove

I can't stand the thought that you may have to be turned out of this place some day."

Alison's face grew ashen. Ignoring the first part of his sentence, her brain only grasped its latter half, and she sprang to the not unnatural conclusion that Hubert had discovered her identity.

"Turned—out—of—this place?" she faltered, her hands shaking so much that some of the flowers she held, dropped to the ground, "turned out?" Her eyes wavered and fell before his glance.

"Well—yes—some day," Hubert answered, coming nearer to her, and looking earnestly into her troubled, downcast face, "not yet for a good while, I hope, but when Uncle Stanley—I mean when I succeed to the property—you see, things here will be a bit broken up and changed, and I——"

"Oh! I understand," Alison's heart leapt with relief, she lifted her eyes from the ground, "you are speaking of something which indeed I hope is a very, very long way off; and I should not ever *want* to stay here, if the dear Squire and Mrs. Metcalfe were not here. It would not be home any more."

"I should like it to be always home to you, Rosamund," Hubert whispered, putting out his hand, and resting it on the girl's shoulder;

"that was exactly what I wanted to explain to you," he added, when she drew herself sharply away from him: "you seem part of the place, you belong to it; it wouldn't seem the same without *you*, and that is why I want you some day—some day when you know me better,—to think whether you could not make up your mind to like me a little, instead of disliking me, and—to stay here always?"

"Always?" Alison looked blankly into his smiling, self-satisfied face, only dimly understanding the drift of his speech, "I could not stay here always, how could I——?"

"You would stay—if—some day you thought you would care about me—and——"

"Oh! no," Alison cried vehemently, stepping further away from him, and looking at him with wide horrified eyes: "what are you thinking about? How can you say such a thing to me? Indeed, indeed I could never care about you—you forget we are almost strangers, and I——"

She glanced instinctively at her black gown. Four months of acting a part successfully had made her an adept in the part she played, and it had now become almost second nature to her to behave as she fancied Reginald Metcalfe's widow would have behaved.

"How can you say such a thing to me?"

she said again, after that quick glance at her sombre draperies; "you forget—surely you forget——"

"No—I do not forget," Hubert interrupted eagerly, "and I know I ought not to have said a word yet. Try not to remember that I did say it; try to forgive a man for losing his head, when he looked at your sweet face; you have bewitched me, Rosamund!"

His voice sank again to a whisper, there was a ring of passion, and of abandonment in it, which the girl had never before heard in any man's voice, aud it frightened her.

"I would rather you did not talk to me like this," she exclaimed nervously, moving fast along the path, the dogs close at her heels; "I cannot listen now——I do not even want to listen—and please, please understand this, that I could not ever care for you. I have never——" she checked herself sharply, the colour flowed over her face. She had almost said, "I have never cared for any man in such a way," when memory brought back to her with a rush, the part she was supposed to be playing, and she fell silent, her breath coming quickly, a look of dismay in her eyes.

"I know what you mean," Hubert said softly and soothingly—and it seemed to her that his gentleness was more abhorrent than

his passion, "you want to tell me that you never cared for anybody but Reg. I know—I know—and I spoke far too soon. I am sorry, Rosamund. I can't say more than that I am sorry; and I promise you I won't worry you again, until a more suitable time."

"There won't ever be a suitable time," Alison exclaimed vehemently: "do please understand that I could not care for you." She faced him again, now, standing still on the path to look at him with blazing eyes; and the terriers, aware that all was not going smoothly between the two humans, pricked their ears, and edged closer to their mistress, looking at Hubert with no friendliness, and with a great show of small sharp teeth.

"Don't be vexed with me, Rosamund," he said, still speaking in the caressing voice that set her teeth on edge, "I spoke in a rush because I couldn't help it. You don't like me yet, but I mean to make you. And I know that there was never any man in your world except Reginald; I heard a lot about you, you know, from Stephen Rambert."

"Stephen Rambert?" the words broke from Alison's lips, in tones of blank astonishment, and only as she heard the surprise in her own voice did she realize a fresh need of caution. Who was Stephen Rambert? The question

ran like wild fire through her brain. What had he to do with Rosamund? And what ought she to say about him?

"Stephen Rambert?" she repeated, this time speaking more quietly, and forcing herself to meet Hubert's eyes, "do you know him?" The question seemed to her the most non-committal she could ask, and she even added, "and where did you meet him?"

"I used to know Rambert pretty well," came the careless answer, "and I met him before the mater and I left town. I meant to tell you about it at once, but it went out of my head."

"Why should I be told about this man?" Alison asked herself distractedly, "what was his connection with Rosamund? And what ought I to say? Oh! what ought I to say?"

"He told me a lot about having met you when you lived in Natal," Hubert went on, greatly to the girl's relief, and before she had time to put in a remark, "I happened to say I was coming down here, and that I was going to meet you for the first time, and then he told me how he, and lots of the fellows, had envied Reg when you married him. But he made it plain enough to me, that you never cared for a living soul excepting Reg."

"Never," Alison breathed, rather than

spoke the word, and her heart beat so fast that it nearly suffocated her, whilst the confusion of thought and speculation in her brain gave her a sense of almost bodily torture. She was assailed by an insane longing to shout aloud, or to break into an unseemly peal of laughter; but all that she actually did, was to say even more quietly and breathlessly than before—

"Never!"

"That was just what Rambert said. But he admired you awfully, Rosamund; and when I told him you were here, he was tremendously pleased, because he is coming down to Cool Ash next week, and I said we would arrange for him to come over here and see you."

"To Cool Ash—is he coming to Cool Ash?" Alison asked faintly, the beating of her heart nearly choking her, a singing in her ears shutting out all the sounds of the September day, "how—how funny!" In the act of making the remark, she realized its pathos, and a little hysterical laugh broke from her.

But Hubert's was not a discerning mind, he was too much of an egoist to be a close observer, and imagining that the girl was upset by hearing of some one belonging to her old life, and the early days of her acquaintance

with Reginald, he did not guess at the true cause of her emotion.

"I expect it does seem queer to you to think of some one you knew in Natal, being so near you as Cool Ash."

"Is he there *now?*" Alison interrupted. "Do you mean to say he has actually come?"

"Coming next week. It seems he met Lord Trenaby on his voyage home, and they asked him down to Cool Ash. I suppose you haven't been over there yet?"

"I have been nowhere," she answered, in a low voice, "in my deep mourning it was impossible to go anywhere, and the dear madre has let me be quiet all these months."

"Rambert is coming down for some special garden party next week," Hubert went on, pursuing, as was his way, his own train of thought, and paying scant attention to the words of his companion: "the Trenabys have a big show on—all the world and his wife will be there. I suppose you won't be able to come, Rosamund, as you are still in deep mourning?"

"I could not possibly go," Alison answered with a decided shake of her head, and a great relief in her heart, "it would be out of the question, even if I wished to go, and I do *not* wish it. I don't wish to face people—

yet." She said the last words hurriedly, fearful lest her listener should guess that it was Rambert she wished to avoid, terrified lest he should suspect her of ulterior motives. But nothing was further from Hubert's thoughts than any suspicion of the woman who had so deeply fascinated him. He knew of no reason to doubt that she was Reginald's widow, and no doubt had arisen in his mind. He was merely bent on arranging a meeting between Rosamund and Rambert, and being absorbed in his own schemes for this object, he saw no point of view but his own, and quite failed to observe his companion's evident reluctance to meet his friend.

"No, I suppose you couldn't come to Cool Ash when there is a garden party," he said thoughtfully, "but perhaps I could drive you over some other afternoon; you wouldn't mind just meeting the Trenabys, would you? And then you could have a good chat over old times with Rambert."

"Don't ask me to go anywhere yet," Alison exclaimed, with again that breathless catch in her voice; "I could not face—people—I could not go to Cool Ash. Perhaps another time Mr. Rambert and I——" She could not end the sentence, she was unable to bring herself to say that perhaps she would

see Mr. Rambert another time, knowing as she did know, that she would avoid coming in contact with him by every means in her power.

"Oh! of course that'll be all right," Hubert answered airily; "you and Rambert are safe to meet, he's as keen as mustard to see you again; don't say that you have forgotten him, or that you don't want to meet him, will you?"

At Hubert's words and his facetious laugh, Alison's fingers closed convulsively over the flowers she held; but though her lips moved, no sound came from them, and in her eyes was the look of fear, that may be seen in the eyes of a hunted animal.

"You look quite worried," Hubert said hastily, "and I do believe it is simply because I suggested taking you to Cool Ash; for of course Rambert is an old friend, not like a stranger. You needn't come to the Trenabys, Rosamund, don't you bother about that. I'll arrange something else with Rambert, you shan't have to meet him in a crowd."

How Alison finally escaped from her tormentor, she never knew, but when, at last, she found herself alone in her own room, she flung the flowers upon the table, locked the

door, and sank down beside the couch, with a little sobbing cry.

"I never thought anything like this could happen," she exclaimed, speaking to the two terriers, who sat side by side on the floor, watching her with tender wistful eyes; "a friend of Rosamund, some one who knew her before she married Reg! Why—he will see everything directly. He will tell every one the truth—and I shall be turned out of the only home I have ever known, sent away from the only people I ever loved." She dropped her head upon her folded arms, and great sobs shook her slight frame; sobs which so disturbed the small watchers by her side, that in another moment, two small noses were thrust into her hands, two rough brown heads touched her caressingly, and whining cries of sympathy broke from Tim and Jock.

"You dear, wee things," she said, raising her head, and looking into the dogs' upturned faces, the tears raining down her own, "you know your poor mistress is in trouble, but you don't know how wicked she is, and what a dreadful tangle she has made of her life. And the worst of it is," she went on, "it is not only my own life that I have tangled. The dear old people love me, they really love me. They have begun to lean on me; they look

upon me as a daughter, and if they hear the truth now, and I have to leave them, they will break their hearts, just as much as I shall break mine. Oh! I wonder—I wonder what *you* would say I ought to do, if you could come and tell me?" she added suddenly, her eyes fixed on Reginald's picture, her arms stretched out towards it, as though by that very gesture, she could make him answer her wistful questioning; "you would hate a lie, you would despise me for my deceit, but if you knew everything—what would you tell me to do?" She moved from her crouching position near the sofa, and knelt down beside the writing-table, her eyes still fixed on the picture, whose eyes looked at her with so steadfast a glance.

"I could have loved you, ah! how I could have loved you," the girl cried suddenly, with a little passionate sob, "and if you had loved me, I should have been a better woman; I should never have stooped to deceit. But I was so lonely, you do not know how dreadful it is to be a lonely woman, and it was easy to take the real Rosamund's place, so fatally easy, that the temptation was too strong for me—and I fell. And now—I wonder what you would tell me to do?" She sprang to her feet and walked rapidly up and down

the room, greatly to the surprise and annoyance of the watchful terriers, whose sympathetic amazement showed itself in every curve of their bodies.

"You poor little souls," Alison exclaimed, pausing in her hurried walk, to stoop and pat her faithful friends, "you think your mistress has lost her senses, and I am not sure that you are wrong. I feel half mad with fear, and remorse, and doubt. I think the easiest thing to do would be to tell the dear old people the truth, before this man, this Stephen Rambert tells it for me. It would be less of a shock for them, if it came direct from me. And yet, how can I hurt them—how can I? How can I, when they have been so good to me, when they love me?"

Once more her footsteps paused before the writing-table—once again she looked long and earnestly at the portrait above it.

"I did not ever think my conscience would make it all seem so dreadful," she said drearily, "but every day that I have been here, every day of the dear old people's love and care for me, has made me feel more and more how hateful I am. And—you,"—she stooped nearer to the picture, "you have taught me so much because—I know you were a good man, and I never knew a good man before in all my life.

But loving you would make—has made me, a better woman. Perhaps I ought to confess what I have done, yet if I do confess, it will hurt those two who love me; and if I meet Stephen Rambert, and he tells the truth, it will hurt them more. I must either tell it myself—or—I must avoid meeting him. There is no middle way. I must do one of these things, or the other—and—I wonder which you would tell me to do if you could speak?"

But the pictured eyes looked gravely, almost sternly into her face, with nothing in their glance which served to help the troubled woman—and with a long sigh, she turned away from the table, and began to pace the room again with quick, agitated steps, —struggling to unravel the tangled problem of her life, which her own hands had fashioned for her.

CHAPTER XI

"SHE IS NOT ROSAMUND AT ALL!"

"MY dear chap, I'm awfully sorry, I feel as if I had brought you here under false pretences, but my poor cousin is in bed with acute neuralgia, and none of us have seen her to-day. I am afraid she won't be down at all this afternoon."

The words were spoken by Hubert in tones of vexation, and the glance which he cast at the tall dark man by his side, was of deprecation, mingled with annoyance.

"Bad luck," came the reply. "I looked forward to seeing little Rosamund again. You must forgive me for calling her by her Christian name, Metcalfe—but she was scarcely more than a child when I knew her, a dear little golden-haired girl, like a fairy."

Hubert stared into his friend's dark face, a puzzled expression upon his own.

"Then she has aged and altered a good deal since you saw her," he answered slowly;

she must have grown quite out of your recollection, old man. Rosamund is tall, not the least like a fairy, and I shouldn't call her hair golden."

The two men were smoking on the terrace of Pailsham Hall, and before replying to Metcalfe's words, Rambert flicked off the end of his cigarette, and looked thoughtfully across the flaming dahlias in the garden beds.

"It is true I haven't seen her for the best part of three years," he said, after that moment's thought, "but I have a fairly clear recollection of what she looked like then, and I should not have expected her to grow much. However she was very young, and young things have a great capacity for growing," he added, with a little shrug of the shoulders. "By Jove, Metcalfe, I can tell you I felt pretty sick, when I heard she had married your cousin. In my own mind I had planned to go back to Natal some day, and ask her to marry me. Those blue eyes of hers bewitched me."

"It is my private opinion that you are mixing up my cousin with somebody else," Hubert exclaimed with a slight show of irritation; "it would require a pretty considerable stretch of imagination to call her eyes *blue*; grey, if you like, but not blue."

"Blue," Rambert repeated firmly, "just as blue as the sea at midsummer. Poor little girl! Perhaps she has washed the blue out of them with her tears, but I could no more mix Rosamund Hensdon up with anybody else, than I could fail to identify myself. I'm awfully sorry I can't see her to-day. No discourtesy intended to you, old chap, or to your people, but I must frankly own I came over to lunch here, expressly to see my old friend; and I'm disappointed."

"You must come over again," Hubert answered, giving his invitation with all the greater warmth, because he was sure that Rosamund was certainly not as much interested in Stephen Rambert as that gentleman appeared to be in her: "come over again—you say you are to be an extra night at Cool Ash; come over one afternoon. If you could manage to drop in about tea time, you are safe to find Rosamund. She doesn't go out anywhere yet, and my uncle and aunt are always pleased to see any friend of mine."

"Lucky beggar you are, Metcalfe," the other man answered, with a sigh, as the two began to pace the terrace side by side, "treated like a son here I suppose? And with all this place coming to you. Well! it may be ill waiting for dead men's shoes, but

you have stepped into shoes, without waiting for them, or expecting them; you are to be envied."

"Oh! it's a nice place," Hubert replied, with a show of indifference, "of course it is like home to me now. My uncle and aunt treat me like a son, and my friends as theirs, so come over again, Rambert. Rosamund is generally so well, that she's pretty sure to be all right in a day or two. But you'll find her terribly changed, if you expect a young girl with golden hair."

"I am prepared to find her changed," Rambert's rather shifty eyes glanced into Hubert's face, and away again quickly; he was at no time able to meet another's glance squarely; "she has been through so much since I saw her. She was scarcely more than a child then; it seemed ridiculous that she should be in charge of other children."

"A child?" Hubert caught at the word, "you *are* giving yourself a lot of poetical licence, old chap. Even three years ago, Rosamund can't have been a child, unless she has grown ten years in these three. Besides which, she was working in London, before she went out to Natal."

"Oh! nonsense, my dear fellow," Rambert laughed lightly, "you've got hold of the

wrong end of the story. Rosamund was scarcely more than a child when she first came out to Natal, anybody who knew her then, could tell you that. She had lived in London, that's all right enough; but she had never worked at anything, she was only a little schoolgirl."

"Anyhow she is not a child now," Hubert answered, with characteristic obstinacy, "she is a woman—and a jolly charming woman too."

"Perhaps you intend to step into your cousin's shoes in more ways than one?" Rambert said, with a smile; "all right, old man, go in and win if you can. I shan't stand in your way. I want to see Rosamund again, for old sake's sake, but for nothing else. I want some one more mature than little golden-haired Rosamund."

"You won't find her as infantile as you seem to expect," Hubert said irritably, "she——"

"Ah! well," Rambert shrugged his shoulders again, "she has been through a good deal since I saw her. Marriage and widowhood are bound to age a girl, and I daresay I shall find her a great deal older. But all the same I don't suppose her character has altered much, and she was by

nature clinging and childlike. I fancy nothing would have altered that."

Whatever had caused the neuralgia that had kept Hubert's cousin in her room all day, it was undoubtedly a very white and weary-looking Rosamund, who came into Mrs. Metcalfe's boudoir late on the following morning: and whether the black lines under her eyes were due to neuralgic pains, or to a sleepless night, they undeniably gave her an appearance of suffering. To Mrs Metcalfe's tender inquiries after her welfare, she answered that she had slept badly, but that she felt well now; and in faltering words she expressed a hope that she had not upset the household by remaining in her room all the previous day.

"I felt I could not come down," she said. "I am afraid Hubert—and—Mr. Rambert will have thought it very horrid of me; but —I—could not come down."

"Mr. Rambert was very disappointed, dear—but—to tell you the honest truth, I was rather glad you did not come down to renew acquaintance with him. I hope you will not think me unkind for saying so, but neither your father nor I took to him."

Even now the brief words "your father," never failed to quicken Alison's heart-beats.

The recognition of the Metcalfes' goodness to her; the sudden remembrance of her narrow escape from seeing Stephen Rambert; and her relief at having successfully avoided him, all these renewed her feeling of compunction; she took a quick step toward the sofa, with the intention of kneeling beside it, and pouring out the whole truth, when Mrs. Metcalfe's soft voice checked her.

"I hope he was not a great friend of yours, Rose? I was not at all favourably impressed with him; but then I am very seldom favourably impressed with Hubert's friends," she added, *sotto voce.*

"Oh! no, he was not at all a great friend of mine," Alison said eagerly, "I—I don't think I ever liked him, and I did not want to see him, only Hubert——" She paused, and looked appealingly at the invalid, whilst racking her brains to remember what she had said to Hubert about Rambert and her acquaintance with him.

"Yes—I quite understand," Mrs. Metcalfe put in soothingly, "Hubert worried you and pressed you to see this man. Hubert, like his mother, is singularly wanting in tact, or he would have realized that you might not care to see people connected with your life in Africa. Well, my dearest, the neuralgia was

most opportune, I only wish it had not left you looking so worn out."

"Mr. Rambert—is still—at Cool Ash?" Alison asked the question nervously. She longed to avoid the subject, yet she was drawn to it again and again, by a fascination which she felt powerless to resist.

"He did not mention to us when he was leaving," Mrs. Metcalfe answered, "but we have done all that was necessary in the way of civility, and I do not suppose we shall see him again. He said he would write to you."

"Yes—I heard from him this morning," Alison's voice was still a little tremulous, a fact which Mrs. Metcalfe attributed to her fatigue; "he wrote to say how sorry he was to miss me, and that he hoped to see me later on, and—he—he said a good deal about old times too. I would rather not remember old times," she continued, with unusual vehemence, "sometimes I think I should like to wipe a sponge over my past, and blot it out for ever."

"My poor darling," Mrs. Metcalfe exclaimed tenderly, "it is a natural feeling, except—you would not want to blot out your life with Reg, would you dear?" The elder woman's voice was tremulous now, her eyes turned towards the table by her couch,

and rested upon the portrait of her son; "your life together—was—happy?"

Again there came to Alison the swift impulse to confess, to tell this gentle-voiced lady the whole truth—to own her sin, and bear the punishment; but again the impulse died away as quickly as it had come.

"I cannot hurt her," the thought pulsed through the girl's brain, "if I tell her the truth, she will be miserable. I can't confess now, I can't make things worse for her, and——"

"Your life with my boy was happy?" A new note of pain was in Mrs. Metcalfe's voice, that interrupted Alison's thoughts, and the girl rightly interpreted the pain. Her silence was leading Reginald's mother to believe she had been unhappy with him,—and throwing scruples to the winds—she flung herself on her knees beside the couch.

"*Happy*?" she cried impetuously, "I can't begin to tell you how happy. It is not over the past with Reginald, that I want to draw a sponge, only over all the life that went before. I should like to blot it out and never remember it again—never—never again."

* * * * *

Two afternoons later, Alison was walking

along the lane that bordered Pailsham Park, making her slow way homewards after a long ramble on the heather uplands, which were a delight, not only to herself but also to her faithful companions, Tim and Jock. These small persons walked sedately by Alison's side, but their tongues lolled out, their ears sat at a jaunty angle, and their roughened coats and general appearance, bore witness to the very good time they had enjoyed upon the breezy common land, where rabbits were the lawful prey of the wide-awake terriers. Alison's face was flushed with exercise, the upland breezes had ruffled her soft hair, and her eyes were shining, as they always shone, when she had been spending an afternoon on her beloved heather heights. All her fears of being obliged to meet Stephen Rambert had vanished, for neither the letter she had received from him, nor anything said by Hubert, had given her reason to suppose he was still in the neighbourhood: and she was singing a gay little song of relief and gladness, as she passed along between the tall hedges, where honeysuckle still lingered, though the blackberries were ripening fast. That Hubert should have schemed to bring Rambert over to Pailsham in order to take her unawares, never

entered her mind as a possibility; and indeed, Hubert himself would have been puzzled to explain why he had not told anyone that his friend was staying for a day longer at Cool Ash, and intended making a second attempt to see Rosamund. With the subtle instinct of a naturally cunning nature, he had determined that, whether she wished it or no, Rambert should see his cousin: and although he put down her evident distaste for seeing her old friend to a reason quite remote from the real one, a certain strain of cruelty in his composition, made him take a malicious pleasure in planning a surprise visit from Rambert. And as a matter of fact, whilst Alison passed singing along the lane, the two men were sauntering down the main road, which crossed the lane at the point where it turned towards the Hall.

"Rosamund will be in by tea time," Hubert was saying; "she takes those precious dogs of Reginald's for tremendous walks over the heather, but they always come back about now. I came up the road to meet you, thinking we might run across Rosamund and the dogs somewhere."

"Queer to think of little Rosamund running about the country by herself—and with dogs too," Rambert commented; "she used

to be a timid little thing, terrified at going out alone, and desperately afraid of dogs."

"Afraid of dogs?" In sheer surprise Hubert stopped short, and stared at his companion. "I don't think I ever saw anybody more absurdly fond of dogs than she is. She treats those two snapping little brutes as if they were human beings, talks to them as if they could understand, and says they are better friends than any man or woman."

Rambert's shoulders went up, with the shrug peculiar to them.

"The years have evidently altered Rosamund pretty considerably," he said. "Why, I can remember when she nearly went into hysterics because a dog jumped on her."

"I can't imagine Rosamund in hysterics at all," Hubert answered, "and by Jove, there she is, coming down the lane, dogs and all. I thought we were bound to meet her."

From the slight rise in the road on which the two men stood, they commanded an excellent view of the steep lane down which Alison walked, singing as she came, and swinging from her hand a great bunch of purple heather. At the sight of her, and at Hubert's words, Rambert stopped dead in the road, staring at the advancing figure as though it were a ghost.

"*That—Rosamund—Hensdon?*" he said, a long pause between each word. "Are you trying to tell me that is Rosamund, Reginald Metcalfe's wife, our little Rosamund?"

"Trying to tell you?" Hubert looked puzzled. "There is no trying needed, my good fellow. That is Rosamund—Reg's widow."

"It is nothing of the sort—forgive my brusqueness," Rambert answered with a harsh laugh. "Heaven only knows who, or what that girl may be, but she is no more Rosamund, Reg's Rosamund, than I am. Good God, man, she is not Rosamund at all!"


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CHAPTER XII

A COMPACT

"NOT—Rosamund—at—all?" Hubert too stood stock still in the middle of the white road, blank incredulity and amazement in his eyes.

"Look here, Rambert," he went on, a note of irritation in his voice, "if this is a joke, I cannot say I think it a particularly good one. Of course that is Rosamund. She——"

"A joke—my good fellow?" Rambert's laugh broke out again, harsh and uncompromising. "Is it a subject about which I should be likely to *joke?* Look at the lady herself. There is not much of a joke about her at this moment."

Hubert's eyes followed the direction of Rambert's, and as they fell upon the girl in the lane, he started violently, a dark flush mounting to his forehead. Precisely at the

moment of Stephen's speech Alison had become aware of the two men advancing towards her, and the swift instinct of fear had at once warned her of the identity of Hubert's companion. All the colour died out of her face, a look of fear, the fear of a trapped creature leapt into her eyes. Just as the men had stopped on catching sight of her, so she had stopped dead when she saw them, and she stared at them with a fixed stare of horror.

Tim and Jock glanced wistfully up into her face, but in this moment of dismay, she had no thought for them, no thoughts for anything but those two silent figures, who now began to come slowly towards her, seeming to her troubled senses like the coming of her doom. She did not stir, though her limbs were shaking, she felt powerless to move; the very desire for movement had left her; her numbed brain could only repeat over and over again, "the end has come, the end has come, the end has come," whilst, with fascinated gaze, she watched the two men approach nearer and nearer. Not one of the human beings taking part in this strange little tragedy, spoke a single word until Hubert and Rambert were within a foot or so of the place where Alison waited them.

And then it was Rambert's voice that broke the silence.

"This is not Rosamund," he said, biting scorn in his tones. "I can't pretend to say who she is, or how she has managed to deceive you all; but this is not Rosamund." The bunch of heather in Alison's hands dropped to the ground; her white face quivered, fear deepened in her eyes.

"Let me——" she began, her voice hoarse and trembling, but Rambert interrupted her roughly, with a contemptuous laugh.

"No doubt you can give some explanation, possibly some plausible explanation," he said scathingly; "but the thing that matters most—the first thing you have to tell us is —where is Rosamund?"

"She died," came in a faint whisper from the girl's white lips, "she—died, and I——"

"And you took her place?" Stephen exclaimed, with a brutal sneer. "We can fill in the details later. That, I take it, is the main outline. You—were—a mere adventuress, and palmed yourself off as Rosamund, on Rosamund's relations?"

Alison's lips moved, but no sound came from them, only the anguish deepened in her eyes; they turned to Hubert with the

dumb appeal of a hunted animal. Presumably there was still a tiny spark of chivalry lingering in the breast of the younger man, for, as the girl turned towards him, he looked at Rambert with a flash of indignation in his light, shifty eyes.

"Hold hard, Rambert," he said, "I'm not keen on hitting either man or woman when they're down. Before we take any further steps I should like to hear what Ros—I mean what this lady has to say."

Alison had never been so near to liking Hubert as at that moment, when he spoke straightforwardly in her defence, and her grey eyes shot a grateful glance in his direction.

"Thank you for trying to be fair to me," she said tremulously. "I—don't want to exonerate myself. I deserve everything—Mr. Rambert says. But—but I am not an adventuress. I was tempted—and——"

"You gave in to the temptation," Stephen once more interrupted, his laugh ringing out mockingly upon the still September air. "Yes—yes—that is all perfectly obvious. And now might we be allowed to enter into a few details? Do you intend to enlighten my friend as to your real name?"

"Oh!" Alison cried passionately, the

scorn of the man rousing her from her numbness of despair, "oh! I own I did wrong. But is it necessary to treat me like the dirt under your feet? I am ready to tell Mr. and Mrs. Metcalfe the truth, all the truth," she drew herself up with a certain dignified pride, "but I am under no obligation to tell it to anyone else." In her indignation, the colour flashed over her face, her eyes shone with anger—she looked, what she was, a supremely beautiful woman, and Hubert watched her eagerly, a greedy look in his eyes.

"By Jove, she's right, Rambert," he exclaimed, "we've no business to badger her. She has admitted the truth. You do admit it, don't you? You own you are not Rosamund; you are not Reginald Metcalfe's widow?"

Alison bent her head, the flame of her indignation had died down again. "I am not Rosamund," she said in a low voice, "I am not—Reginald's widow. I——"

"I'm more than half inclined to swear you never saw Reginald Metcalfe in your life," Rambert put in, his inherent love of bullying some one weaker than himself, of baiting a fallen adversary, once more getting the better of him. "Did you ever see Reginald?" he persisted.

"No—never." The voice was lower than before. Rambert threw back his head, and laughed coarsely.

"It's as pretty a bit of fraud, as shameless a fraud boldly carried out, as anything I ever heard of," he said. "By Heaven, I more than half admire the girl for doing it." His insolent gaze swept Alison from head to foot, resting longest on her beautiful troubled face, where the colour came and went in swift flushes of misery. "There is a good deal to admire in well-planned deception, especially when it is also well carried out," he went on, his thin lips parting in a sarcastic smile, "a good deal to admire too in the person of the fair deceiver," he added, making a sweeping bow towards Alison, which provoked a growl of wrath from the two interested, and watchful terriers.

"We've had enough of this," Metcalfe exclaimed quickly, the humiliation in Alison's face once again appealing to the spark of nobility in his small and petty nature, "I'm sorry it was all sprung on you—Mrs—Miss—

"Dering—my name is Dering," Alison said quietly. "You need not apologise. The truth could not be hidden for ever. I have had my happiness; I—found a home—and

love—for the first time in my life; and now —the end has come."

"She takes it jolly well," was Hubert's rapid reflection, "standing up she takes it with her back against the wall. She's out and out the loveliest woman I ever set eyes on; and if all this hadn't been found out, ten to one Uncle Stanley would have made her one of the richest too. Hanged if I don't believe—" his meditations were interrupted by Alison's voice.

"I am going straight back to the Hall now, to tell my own story; you will let me do that, I suppose?"

"Let you colour it your own way you mean," Rambert asked, "what do you say to that, Metcalfe? I suggest that you and I escort—Miss—Dering—to your uncle and aunt. The person who perpetrated such a fraud is capable of—a good deal."

He shrugged his shoulders and smiled.

"I shall tell the truth," Alison answered, a hopeless ring in her voice, "tell the truth—and then—go away—never to come back. You need not be afraid. This is the end."

"Wait a minute," Hubert exclaimed, as she took a forward step, "don't be in such a hurry, Ros—I mean Miss Dering. Things want thinking over a bit, before you do any-

thing decided; I want you to—well to hold your tongue for a little while."

Hubert's thoughts had been working quickly, since those rapid and undefined reflections of a moment back, and he spoke excitedly.

"Hold my tongue?" Alison repeated; "do you mean that you and Mr. Rambert want to tell my story for me? I promise you I will tell it truly; the deception is over."

"No, no, I don't want to tell it for you," Hubert answered quickly; "I can trust you all right. It isn't that—but,"—his words stumbled out confusedly, he had the grace to look a little ashamed of himself, whilst Rambert's expression was one of unfeigned astonishment,—"the fact is—I think it would be wrong to break this thing suddenly to the old people. It's bound to be an awful shock to them; they're awfully fond of you—and——"

"I know—I know," Alison cried piteously, "and you may believe me or not as you like, but over and over again I have meant to tell them the truth—and I have kept it back because I could not bear to hurt them." Great tears welled into her eyes, and rolled slowly down her cheeks: "they have been so good to me. I have loved them, I have tried to be

a daughter to them, and now—I cannot bear to break their hearts."

"Well," Hubert spoke more slowly, his eyes never leaving her face, "why—should you break their hearts?"

Rambert started, and seemed about to speak, then a gleam of understanding came into his eyes, he smiled and was silent.

"I don't understand," Alison answered, "why do you ask me not to speak yet? Why do you seem to imply that I need not hurt the dear old people? I must tell them the truth now, and—the truth will break their hearts."

"Supposing we make a compact?" Hubert's voice shook with eagerness, "supposing——"

"A — compact?" Alison shrank away from him, her eyes wide with horror: "are you tempting me all over again? Do you want to help me go on with what your friend called a shameless fraud? And—it was a shameless fraud," she added, under her breath: "what do you mean by a compact? There could be no compacts between you and me."

"Don't let us be too sure of that," Hubert answered in the soothing, caressing voice which invariably made Alison's flesh creep;

"you are thinking about yourself; I am thinking about the old people."

("Good stroke that," Rambert mentally ejaculated, "by Jove I believe I see what the wily fox is after. He means to carry on the fraud, and keep the heiress.")

"I think of them day and night," Alison cried brokenly, "but there is no way of saving them this new sorrow. I must be true to them now; there is no middle way."

"Oh! yes there is. At least there is the same way you've been going all this time." Hubert watched her furtively, and noted the indignant start she gave: "what I mean is this, Miss Dering," he continued, speaking with an earnestness Alison had never before heard from him, "we must try at all costs to save my uncle and aunt from worse trouble; and I intend to help you do it."

"To help me? But it wouldn't be right," Alison said drearily, "and I can't enter into any compacts with you. I believe you are tempting me to go on doing wrong; but I can't think clearly. My mind seems all confused; I only want to do right now, because I have done wrong so long."

The dazed hopelessness in her eyes went to Hubert's heart; he put his hand on her arm gently and kindly.

"You trust me about this," he said, opposition quickening in him the desire to carry his point; "you are feeling upset just now, you can't judge fairly. When you think it all over quietly, you will understand what I mean, and I think you will agree with me."

"Shall I?" Alison put her hand wearily to her head: "my brain is in a whirl. I can't see anything clearly, but I am sure I ought to go straight home and tell the truth."

"And I am sure you ought to do no such thing," Hubert said firmly; "be guided by me, Miss Dering, do as I advise—not for your own sake, but for the sake of those two who love you. For their sakes keep silence, at any rate until you have had time to think out the whole question."

"I would rather tell the truth and end it all; I would rather go away at once and for ever."

"But we are thinking of my uncle and aunt, not of you," Hubert's tones grew more persuasive, and Rambert smiled again: "they are old, they lean on you. They look on you as their daughter. You ought to consider them before all things."

"Ought I? Ought I to sacrifice my conscience to them, I wonder?" Alison

spoke dreamily, scarcely conscious of the presence of the two men, "I wonder," she repeated.

"I should say no sacrifice was too great to make for them, when they have been so good to you," Hubert answered with decision. "I am sure you will be of my opinion when you have thought it out thoroughly. Meanwhile—promise me you will say nothing until you have spoken to me again."

His tones were so insistent, and the girl's own thoughts were in such a chaos of doubt and distraction, that she yielded to his new masterfulness, assuring herself that she would only keep silence for a few hours, and salving her conscience with the thought that she delay of an hour or two could make no possible difference. In her present shaken and dazed condition, she felt totally unable to resist Hubert, or to argue with him any further.

"Very well," she said gently, "I will promise to say nothing to them until I have spoken to you again. But let me tell the truth soon. I cannot go on any longer living a lie." With these words she passed on down the lane, the terriers close at her heels, the eyes of the two men following her tall, slight figure until she turned a bend of

the road, and vanished from their sight.

"I conclude that you intend that she should go on living a lie," Rambert said to Hubert, as soon as she was beyond earshot; "your little plan unrolled itself before my eyes as you were speaking to her, and by Jove, Metcalfe, it's a fairly cute idea." Hubert's face darkened.

"You are talking at random," he answered coolly, "I saw quite well that if Miss Dering burst in on my poor old uncle and aunt with her true story, she would upset them frightfully, and give them a dreadful shock. I am only anxious to spare them by putting off this confession—and—letting the truth come out gradually."

"Hum—letting the truth slide to so distant and indefinite a future, that it will never be told at all, whilst you marry the lady, and allow her to pose still as Reginald Metcalfe's widow, and the old man's heiress."

Hubert flushed darkly—Rambert's shot had told, and Rambert's sarcastic smile was hard to meet.

"There is no necessity to disturb the old people's peace of mind," he said sullenly: "when I first understood what a deception had been practised, I was as angry as anybody could be, but I quite see that——"

"You quite see on which side of your bread it would be most profitable to spread the butter. Your uncle can leave his money where he chooses, and he might choose a hospital! All right, my dear chap, don't bother to apologise to me. I don't care whether you compound a felony or not; it doesn't matter to me, only"—here Rambert's voice grew suddenly serious and significant, and he came closer to his friend—"only—you won't expect me to hold my tongue out of pure friendship for you and—the fair—Rosamund—will you?"

"Blackmail you mean?" Hubert said sharply.

"I never call things by ugly names if I can help it," was the nonchalant reply, "and that name is a very unpleasant one to use between—friends. What I mean is this—I am quite ready to back you up in any scheme that may benefit you, but my backing will—have its price. *Voilà tout!*"

"Perhaps I have no scheme." Hubert's voice was still sullen, he glowered angrily at Rambert.

"Time will show me," Rambert answered lightly; "if I find that Miss Dering remains—Mrs. Reginald Metcalfe—if I find that Mr. Hubert Metcalfe accepts her as his cousin,

and wishes to make her something nearer and dearer—well—I shall expect to receive an equivalent for silence. That is all."

"All," Hubert muttered savagely.

"All," Rambert replied suavely, "I am a poor man. I find my wits have to do a good deal towards my support; in this instance fate has done more for me than my wits. I think we need not discuss the matter further; you and I understand each other now. Shall we stroll back to the house—and ask—Rosamund to give us some tea?"

CHAPTER XIII

"I AM REGINALD METCALFE!"

"I HAVE followed you to-day to put an end to this shilly-shallying. You must give me your answer here and now."

"I can't do it, Hubert. The price you ask is too big. I have been silent for a fortnight because I promised you I would not tell the truth until you allowed me to tell it. But now——"

"Now you had better make up your mind, once for all, to hold your tongue permanently, to keep up the deception—and to marry me." Hubert Metcalfe spoke brutally, insistently, insolently to the trembling girl who faced him, and he ended his sentence with a short laugh that struck terror to her soul.

"You have avoided me very skilfully the last few days, but I was determined you should hear me out, and I followed you here. This is a fairly lonely place, Miss Alison Dering, and before we leave it, I intend that

we should come to a complete understanding."

Alison cast a despairing glance around her, a glance which told her only too truly that the place was indeed lonely, that she was completely at the mercy of the man who stood watching her with insolent admiration in his small light eyes, a malicious smile curving his full, sensual lips.

Since the afternoon, now nearly a fortnight ago, when she had been confronted by Stephen Rambert, the girl had not known a moment's peace of mind. Thwarted by Hubert in her first wish to tell the truth straightforwardly and to suffer the just penalty of her deception, she had spent the intervening time in remorse and misery rendered doubly acute by Hubert's unwelcome and persistent attentions. Over and over again she had pleaded with him to release her from her promise, to allow her to go to his uncle and aunt, and tell the whole story, but Hubert's permission had been steadily refused: and as he based his refusal upon pretended consideration for the feelings of the two old people, Alison had yielded to him, against her conscience and her better judgment.

With each day that passed, Hubert had become increasingly enamoured of his own

scheme for marrying Alison, and thereby becoming possessed of the fortune which would certainly accrue to her as the supposed widow of Reginald Metcalfe; and with the mulish obstinacy of an inherently weak character, his determination to win Alison grew stronger every time she repelled him. The passion he undoubtedly felt for her could not be dignified by the name of love; but it was perhaps the best feeling of which the man was capable, and it was real enough and strong enough to carry him almost to any lengths in the securing of his object. To these lengths he was prepared to go. Although Alison had contrived to avoid him during the past few days, she was now completely in his hands, for he had at last tracked her down in a lonely upland lane, where passers by were few and far between, and where it was most unlikely that their interview would be interrupted.

The very loneliness and remoteness had led Alison to direct her footsteps thither, when, after luncheon, she had as she thought managed to escape Hubert's vigilant eyes, and had stolen out across the garden towards the moorland she loved. But now she realized with a genuine terror, and fast-beating heart, that she was alone with the man she

hated, alone in a desolate and little-frequented lane, high up upon the heather slopes; realized too that she was at bay at last, her back against the wall, with no possibility of succour.

"Yes—we are quite by ourselves," Hubert answered, in response to that look of despair the girl had cast round the lonely landscape; "you may as well make up your mind to give me the answer I want."

"I cannot," she answered, wringing her hands, "I *cannot*. Why do you pester me? You know I could never care for you; you know I have always avoided—always——"

"Always hated me? Yes, I know that perfectly well. But Rambert's revelations have altered our relations to one another. Whilst I thought you were really Reg's widow—when I believed you to be actually my cousin by marriage, I had no power to make you do anything you didn't choose to do. Now—it is possible to force your hand."

His smile roused Alison from the lethargy of despair into which she had sunk; she flamed round angrily upon her persecutor.

"You may not find it so easy as you think to force my hand," she cried indignantly; "you tell me you will be silent for ever about my deception, on condition that I will marry

you. But supposing I do not wish you to be silent; supposing I refuse to marry you; supposing I end all this remorse and misery, by going straight to Mr. Metcalfe with the whole truth—what then?"

"Then," Hubert replied, watching her with the hungry look of a cat watching its prey, "then you would break the old people's hearts, and that, I fancy, would hurt you more even than being obliged to leave the home you have learnt to love, and you would be obliged to do that as well. They would never get over the shock of finding you are not the person you profess to be; but—unless you promise to marry me, they will have the shock to bear."

Alison's face which had flushed crimson with anger, grew slowly white again; she put out her hands, with a pleading gesture that would have appealed to any man less selfish and callous than the man before her.

"I shall tell them the truth myself," she whispered unsteadily; "I—I should try to make them understand my temptation—how hard it was to resist it. Perhaps it would hurt them less, if they—understood."

"Look here, Rosamund—or Alison, as I ought to say," Hubert seized her wrists roughly, "you don't seem thoroughly to

have grasped the situation. If you refuse to marry me, if you insist upon letting the old people know the truth, I shall tell it to them, you will have no chance of making your story sound plausible. I shall go straight back to the house from here, and tell it them myself in all its naked frankness."

Alison, struggled to free herself from the grasp of Hubert's detaining hands, but finding her struggles useless, she at last desisted, saying bitterly—

"You are a coward as well as a bully. Because I love the dear old people, you strike at me through them. You know I could not bear to hurt them; you know I would give my life for them. And so you ask me to sell myself to you, for their sakes. I hate you!"

"Gently, gently, my pretty fury," was the mocking retort, whilst Hubert tightened his grip on her wrists. "I believe you are beginning to see reason. It is precisely for the sake of my dear uncle and aunt, that I wish you to remain silent about the past. But my silence has to be bought—and Rambert's silence has to be bought—and all this we must do for the sake of sparing the old people."

"Mr. Rambert's silence has to be bought?"

Alison looked into her tormentor's face, with stupefied eyes.

"Yes—bought. He won't be silent for nothing. Already he is clamouring for payment," Hubert's brow darkened, "and if he doesn't get what he wants, he will write to my uncle. Now perhaps you will understand that there is no time to lose in shilly-shallying."

"But why," she faltered, "why do you want to force me to marry you, when I cannot pretend to like, much less to love you?"

"Because I want you," he answered brutally, "I want you, and I mean to have you. Can't you see I am mad about you? And I swear I will make you marry me; whether you love me or hate me you shall marry me. I swear it by this—and this—and this." As he spoke, he crushed the girl against him, and kissed her brow, her cheeks, her lips, with burning, passionate kisses that stung her, with an intolerable shame, and seemed to sear her very soul. With a sudden access of strength, born of fury and desperation, she tore herself from his encircling arms, pushed him from her with a force of which no one would have believed her capable, and rushed down the steep upland lane, in a state

of terror, that bordered on frenzy. So distraught was she with fear, that she neither heard the sound of heavy panting breathing from behind the hedge, nor saw a face that peered out between the thick leaves of a stunted sycamore; a face so wild, so terrible, that had she seen it the sight of it must surely have checked the girl's fleeing steps. But blind and deaf to everything about her, consumed with an overwhelming fear, Alison ran on down the stony lane, without pause or rest, until, at the point where the lane joined the main road, she sank down, utterly worn out and exhausted, against the tall signpost by the wayside.

Almost at that identical moment, a station fly lumbered slowly up to the little grass plot on which the signpost stood, and a man who was looking eagerly out of the window, became aware of the prostrate woman's form lying there, with white face and closed eyes. To stop the conveyance was the work of a moment, and the traveller, a tall man with bronzed and lined face, leapt from it and bent over the apparently unconscious figure on the grass.

"Poor soul! What in the world has been happening here?" the man exclaimed, looking pitifully down at Alison's terror-stricken

features, her torn and dishevelled garments, and the shower of hair that had escaped from her hat, and lay about her white face. "She is plainly a lady, and she looks as if she had been frightened to death." As she did not stir, he stooped over her, and touching her hand, said gently—

"Can I help in any way? I am afraid you have had an accident?"

With a violent start and a little cry of fear, Alison sprang into a sitting position, then, fixing her eyes on the stranger's face, a sudden smile broke over her face.

"Was it all a dream?" she said, "did I—did Hubert?—Is it all a dream—and have you come to help me—Reg." Her eyes closed again, the look of terror had wholly left her face, she sank back upon the grass, a smile on her face like the smile of a happy child. But the tall man by her side looked down at her, with an expression of hopeless bewilderment.

"Reg?" he murmured under his breath, "what made her say that? Who can she be, and why does she speak to me—as if—— Can I drive you anywhere?" he said, firmly and aloud, his hand touching the girl's shoulder: "I am afraid you must have had some accident. You are not dreaming, you

are lying under the signpost at the end of Milsom Lane. I was driving by and found you here. This is Milsom Lane."

The last two words seemed to rouse her into full consciousness, and to re-awaken all her terrors. The look of fear returned to her eyes; she struggled to pull herself up again, and her hand seized and grasped the stranger's hand, with a convulsive pressure.

"Don't let him touch me," she cried; "take care of me—indeed, indeed I would rather tell the truth—only don't let him touch me. His kisses have burnt my soul. I wish he was dead!" She spoke wildly and incoherently, shuddering from head to foot, and never lifting her eyes higher than the thin, brown hand to which she clung so desperately.

"I will take care of you," the tall man said softly, speaking tenderly as to a little frightened child, "don't be afraid any more. No one shall touch you, no one shall hurt you. Tell me where you live, and I will take you there directly."

Still without lifting her eyes, and shivering uncontrollably, Alison answered, in level monotonous tones—

"I live at Pailsham Hall. I thought I was dreaming, and that Reg had come to help

me. I am Rosamund Metcalfe—Reginald Metcalfe's widow."

The hand to which hers clung, released itself with a jerk; the voice that a moment before, had been soothing to the point of tenderness, suddenly grew stern and grave; over the man's bronzed face swept an expression of amazement, incredulity, horror.

"*Who—do—you say you are?*" he asked shortly and sharply.

And Alison, too dazed to realize the change in his tones, repeated monotonously, "I am Rosamund: Rosamund Metcalfe, Reginald's widow. Please take me home."

All the pity that had looked out of the man's grey eyes, faded from them; they became suddenly like points of polished steel.

"You say you are Rosamund Metcalfe?" he answered slowly, his eyes never leaving the downcast face, "then either you or I is mad. You are no more like Rosamund, than I am like that driver on the box; and nobody knows better than I do what Rosamund is like, because I am Rosamund's husband. I am Reginald Metcalfe, and I swear I never saw you in my life."

CHAPTER XIV

"YOU ARE NOT MY WIFE!"

"IF you have sufficiently recovered from the shock you sustained, perhaps you will be good enough to explain yourself?" With icy coldness the stranger by the signpost spoke these words, his eyes fixed sternly on the shrinking, trembling woman who had now risen to her feet, and stood before him with burning face, and downcast eyes.

"You can drive on to the lodge," he said curtly, turning to the driver, who watched the little scene with round, inquisitive eyes, "wait for me there." A little silence followed the slow departure of the cab, then the man's voice spoke again.

"As I said before—either you or I must be mad, I am Reginald Metcalfe—but you are not Rosamund, you are not my wife. Why are you here? And where is she?"

The words dropped from him in short jerks; his eyes were fixed on the drooping

figure with the stern gaze of some avenging angel.

"They said—you—were—dead," Alison spoke at last, but she did not lift her eyes, "and I——"

"And you"—there was a certain mercilessness in the two short words, "and you——"

"I was so poor, so wretched. It was such a temptation. I took her name." She spoke incoherently, then all at once flung out her hands towards him, raising her eyes to his stern face. "There is no forgiveness possible," she cried, "I know that: I do not ask for forgiveness—but—I was so lonely—I was tempted——"

Her white face was lifted pitifully, her eyes were so full of fear and remorse, that Reginald Metcalfe's heart was touched. He looked at her less sternly, but the bewilderment deepened in his eyes.

"I do not begin to understand it all," he said. "Where is my wife? Why are you masquerading under her name?"

"I don't know how to tell you," Alison whispered, a great pity for him thrusting aside every other sensation; "she—thought you were dead. They told her you were killed in the hunting expedition. She—came back to England."

"I know—I know," he exclaimed impatiently, "when I escaped—when I got back to the coast, I heard my wife had come to England, I came straight home to her, I wanted to surprise her and the dear old people—and now—where is my wife?"

"She came—to Southampton," Alison's voice faltered, "and—she was very, very ill when she landed. She—died——"

"Died?—Rosamund—dead?"

"She died—the night after she landed——"

"Who killed her?" the young man said brokenly, and he seized Alison's wrists, and gripped them in a fierce grasp. "Who killed my poor little girl, my little Rose?" His face had paled under its tan, his eyes had a dangerous light in them, the pressure of his hands on Alison's wrists was torture to her; but the mental agony she was enduring made her oblivious of bodily pain, and she did not even wince.

"She was ill," Alison's voice came in short gasps, "she was dying, when she landed. They brought her to the lodgings at Southampton where I was staying, and they asked me to help to nurse her."

"And you?" Reginald dropped her hands and moved a step back from her, an awful suspicion looking out of his eyes. The

thought that had flashed into his mind, revealed itself suddenly to Alison—she sank back against the signpost with a little moan.

"Ah! not that," she whispered, "not that! I did wrong—I was tempted, but—I could have loved her—I did everything I could to help her—I did not *kill* her. You look at me as if you were sure I had killed her, and I would not have hurt a hair of her head. She was so pretty, and so sweet." The sentence ended in a long-drawn, choking sob, and worn out by the varying emotions of the afternoon, Alison covered her face with her hands, and broke into pitiful, hopeless weeping. Reginald, torn also by conflicting emotions, stood silently watching her, his eyes softening a little at the sight of her overwhelming misery; the tense lines of his face relaxing at her passionate repudiation of the suspicion she had read in his glance.

The tidings of his wife's death had come to him as such an unexpected shock, that his dazed senses almost refused to grasp the truth, and a dull pity for the sobbing girl by the signpost drew him to say at last—

"Don't cry like that; why do you cry?" she lifted her face and looked at him; in spite of the cloud of sorrow that lay over his brain, he realized the sweetness of her tear-filled

eyes, the pure and lovely outlines of her features.

"I think my heart is broken," she said. "I know I am being punished as I deserve. But I did not kill her. I never wanted to harm her, no, not for a single instant. Do I look like a murderess?" she cried almost fiercely.

"Hush," he answered, as her sobs broke out again, "hush! I—it was the base thought of a moment—only for a moment. For God's sake, do not cry like that. Hush—hush." He spoke as gently as though he spoke to an unhappy child, and his hand went out and rested on her shoulder, with a comforting touch that quieted her.

"There has been so much to-day," she said, still sobbing helplessly, "first my conscience, that has gone on all the time, all the time urging me to tell the truth; and then—Hubert—and—all that happened in the lane,—ah! I cannot bear to think of that," she shivered, and her face turned so ashen a colour, that Reginald instinctively put his arm about her, fearing that she was on the verge of fainting.

"Why do you speak of Hubert?" he asked.

"Don't speak of him! I don't want to

speak of him," she exclaimed excitedly, "I hate him—I—wish he were dead."

"Hush!" Reginald said again, amazed at the sudden excitement which had checked her sobs, and sent a flame of crimson over the whiteness of her face, "hush!"

"It seems as if I could not bear any more," she said, her voice dropping into a tone of intense weariness; "I have just come to the end of everything. First there was all the misery and remorse of this fortnight—this dreadful fortnight; then—then the horror in the lane," she shuddered again, "and now—you have come back—and—we thought you were dead—and I—and I——"

"You have been personating my wife" —all the sternness came back into Reginald's voice, though simple humanity forced him still to support the girl's form, so heavily did she sway against him—"my poor little wife who—is dead." His voice faltered and failed suddenly.

"I—would give my own life to bring her back," the girl whispered, a passion of yearning sympathy for him flooding her heart, "she was so sweet—she loved you so. She died talking of you, and if by dying I could bring her back to you, I would die this minute —oh! how gladly I would die!" Her voice

rang with genuine feeling, but the momentary softness which had moved Reginald had passed away, and his face was hard and stern once more.

"It is useless to talk in that way," he said bitterly, turning away from her, and looking along the long stretch of road that led towards the Hall, "you cannot give me back my little wife—my poor, pretty Rose. I meant to surprise her—and her welcome would have been so sweet—so sweet!" The almost boyish expression, the pathetic quiver in his voice at the end of the sentence, above all the heartbreak in the eyes he once more turned towards Alison, filled her soul with almost intolerable pain. Yet she could only stand and look at him silently, speech at that moment seemed an impossibility—silence her sole refuge.

"For us to remain here discussing this miserable business is worse than useless," Reginald exclaimed, when the silence between them had become unbearable, "talking will not help matters. You had better come straight back with me to the Hall——"

"Ah! no, no," Alison interrupted with a short cry, "I could not come there with—you; I could not go back now. Tell them the truth; tell them the worst of me,

but—do not ask me to face them with you."

Reginald's face set itself into grimmer lines; he spoke harshly, almost brutally—

"You cannot escape the difficulties you have made for yourself, and for others. I still feel as if I could not take in all that has happened—but I totally decline to allow you to get away scot free, leaving me to tell your ugly story for you."

"But I can't go back to the Hall; I can't go back there. Hubert——"

"What has my cousin to do with the question?" Reginald asked, increased frigidity in his accents. Alison's eyes dropped beneath the sternness in his eyes, her hands went out towards him again in that appeal which before had moved him to pity, though now it seemed merely to quicken his anger.

"Hubert," she paused and shivered, a strange look of horror crossing her face, as she flashed a quick glance towards the lane leading to the moorland, "I—I cannot bear to speak of him—but indeed, indeed I cannot go back to the Hall. Do not torture me!" She shuddered violently, and leant against the signpost, as if for actual support. Surprise and doubt chased each other across Reginald's features, his eyes travelled search-

ingly over the girl's white, horror-stricken face, and strangely dishevelled appearance, then he said slowly—

"I have no wish to torture you. God knows I would not hurt any woman, not even one who has wronged me as you have done. I cannot force you to return to the Hall with me, but do not for a moment suppose that I will allow this deception to go on. My father and mother shall not be deceived for an instant longer. I—it makes me sick to think of it all—it makes me sick," he added vehemently, his sterner speech breaking into the boyishness more natural to him.

"I was so lonely—so poor; it came as such a sudden temptation," Alison began falteringly, but he cut her short—

"Poverty and loneliness need not lead one into fraud—gross fraud." Anger was fast overcoming his pity even the sight of the figure that swayed against the signpost at his sharp words no longer had power to move him. "I shall go straight on to the Hall now, straight to my poor old parents whom you have so grossly deceived. You will no doubt follow me presently."

Alison looked at him dumbly, but no words would come to her lips, the sob in her throat choked all utterance, only again her hands

wrung themselves together in a very misery of appeal. But the appeal passed unheeded by the man who watched her with such gravely accusing, nay, such scornful eyes.

"I think there is nothing more to be said," he spoke quietly, after that long glance; "when you come back to the house, I will not trouble you. I shall not even see you. Without doubt you will wish to pack, and leave as soon as possible, and I shall not molest you. ——Good afternoon."

He lifted his hat, and Alison bent her head mechanically, but still no words came to her lips, she stood clinging to the signpost, watching his tall form until he had turned a bend in the road and vanished from her sight; then she dropped her face into her hands, and long-drawn sobs shook her from head to foot, as she said under her breath—

"But I shall never go back to the house —never again—no, never again. And I shall not see you any more, because I am going out of your life for ever." And as she spoke she gathered herself together with a great effort, and casting one shuddering glance towards the steep lane that led to the uplands, she moved slowly away along the high road, in the direction of the town, deliberately turning her back upon the village and the Hall.

CHAPTER XV

"I WISH ROSE WOULD COME HOME!"

"REGINALD—my son!" Mr. Metcalfe stood in the library of his house, gazing at the tall traveller with eyes so dim that they could barely see the bronzed face, the strong alert form. His hands rested on his son's shoulders, his voice quivered with irrepressible emotion, a great gladness illuminated his face.

"Our boy come back to us from the dead," he said tremulously, after that eloquent pause. "I don't—think I can quite believe it!"

"I'm fairly substantial, Dad," Reginald's voice shook almost as much as his father's had done, "I've had a roughish time,—but I have come through to safety. Thank God!"

"Thank God," the elder man echoed reverently, his grey head bent. "When Jobson told me a gentleman wished to speak to me,

I had no idea who I should find waiting for me. Your mother and your dear wife——"

"My dear wife,"—each word came from Reginald's lips with singular emphasis; his father did not allow him to complete the sentence, his hands pressed his son's shoulder again, with a more caressing touch.

"She is an angel in our house, my dear son; no words of mine can ever tell you what she has been to your mother and me; a daughter—more than a daughter. Your wife is very, very dear to us both."

"But my poor little wife," Reginald began vehemently, when again the elder man checked his torrent of speech.

"She is no longer the child-wife of whom you wrote to us," Mr. Metcalfe said, unconsciously uttering a profounder truth than he realized; her great sorrow developed her, my dear boy. You will find her a woman now—a woman of singular character and strength. She has been broken-hearted, Reg; it is good to think of the joy that is coming for her now."

"Broken-hearted?" The younger man spoke like a person in a dream, and before his eyes rose a persistent vision of a woman leaning against a white signpost where two roads met, a woman whose face was lifted to his in

an agony of remorse, whose hands were outstretched to him in an appeal which he had repudiated with scorn and reproaches.

"Broken-hearted?" he repeated heavily, as another vision leapt into life before his eyes, a vision this time of a girl's laughing face and blue eyes—of the child-wife whose arms had clung so closely round his neck, when they parted in Central Africa, "but—Rose——"

"Rose has shown that she has a faithful and a loving woman's heart," Mr. Metcalfe exclaimed; "however young and untried she was when you married her, she has matured now. I could not wish any man to have a better or a sweeter wife."

Reginald stared dumbly at his father, he felt incapable of speech; the revelation that lay on his lips ready to be told, refused to be uttered; he felt as if he had been caught and held in a net, from which escape was every moment growing more and more impossible.

"Rose has been everything to your poor mother and to me," Mr. Metcalfe's voice reached the brain of his stupefied listener through a chaos of bewildering sensations hard to define, "we have both learnt to lean upon her, and to love her more than words can express."

"Is she—will she——" Reginald stammered, scarcely knowing what it was he had intended to say, dimly aware that he must say something, but less and less inclined to startle his father with that revelation, which he assured himself must eventually be told. Later on he must of course tell the dear deceived old people the whole truth; just now—it seemed impossible to damp the greatness of their joy, by letting them know of the gross fraud that had been practised upon them, by the woman of whom his father spoke so tenderly. They actually loved her, this woman who had personated his Rose, his pretty Rose. They loved her, they leant upon her; she had been everything to them, the woman who was an adventuress, a mere vile adventuress!

An—adventuress? The face of the girl by the cross-roads rose before him again, unbidden, unwanted—the white face and grey eyes deep with anguish, and his own heart cried out against him, that he was unjust.

"Rose is out," Mr. Metcalfe's voice once more interrupted the maddening whirl of thought, "I will watch for her, and break the wonderful news to her gently. She will be nearly wild with happiness. And your

mother, Reg—you must let me tell her gently too; she is not even so strong as she was when you went away. The terrible news of your death nearly killed her. Sometimes I think it is only Rose's tenderness and care for her, that have kept her alive."

It seemed to Reginald that those strange, invisible nets of which he was acutely conscious, were closing tighter and tighter round him. "Rose's tenderness and care." How the old people loved the stranger they supposed to be his wife, who yet was not his wife! How they loved her, and *how good she had been to them!* Was it possible as yet to make that revelation which must be made—which, when made, would come to them as so terrible a blow? Not yet—no, not yet. Presently, later, he must have time to think out the whole strange business thoroughly. Meanwhile, for the sake of the old people, he would, perforce, hide his own grief, and pretend to be as full of joy as they expected him to be.

"There will be so much for you to tell us, my dear boy," Mr. Metcalfe said, moving towards the door, and looking at his son, a world of tender yearning in his eyes, "but you must tell it all when Rose and your mother are with us. I will go to your mother

now, and tell her the wonderful news, and perhaps by then Rose will have come back. She always comes in at teatime, to take care of us.

As the door closed behind his father, Reginald walked to the window and looked out, trying to rouse himself from the dream-like condition into which the startling events of the day had thrown him. To come suddenly into this quiet home-like life, to hear his father speaking in calm and even accents of afternoon tea, when he himself was suffering an upheaval of his whole being, gave him an extraordinary sense of incongruity. The tragic woman he had left at the cross-roads; the tragedy of his own wife's death; the mingling of acute pain and great joy in the home-coming which had meant so much to him—all these increased the nightmare sensation which paralysed his faculties. Throughout the whole voyage from Africa, he had over and over again pictured his arrival at home, dreamt of his wife's childish happiness, of the deeper joy of his father and mother, of the delight which they would all manifest when he came back to them. And the reality was not like his dream. His wife was dead. His golden-haired Rose lay buried in some far-away cemetery, perhaps even

under a name which was not hers; and another woman had usurped her place; a woman who was dear to his father and mother —dear as a daughter of their own might have been; a woman on whom they leant, who was "everything" to them; a woman who stood at the signpost by the cross-roads, with a white face of undying remorse and sorrow.

Out in the garden over which Reginald's eyes travelled, the late afternoon sunlight fell upon flaming dahlias and stately sunflowers, but the man who looked upon the glories of the autumn garden saw none of these things; saw neither the glowing splendour of the trees, nor the scarlet glory of the Virginian creeper, that flung its crimson leaves over the low wall of the terrace—saw only a woman's anguished eyes, a woman's heart-broken face.

Even when, ten minutes later, he was kneeling beside his mother's couch, whilst her hands stroked his hair, and her eyes looked tenderly into his, he could not shake off the impression of that heart-broken face; and he found himself echoing the wish expressed in Mrs. Metcalfe's words—

"I wish Rose would come home!"

But the sunlight faded away from the

glowing dahlias and stately sunflowers in the garden, faded from the scarlet creeper on the terrace, from the orange and golden beeches in the park—died at last from the tree-tops leaving behind it a world of soft purple shadows, and still Rose did not come. Mrs. Ralph Metcalfe took the missing girl's place at the tea table, by turns commenting volubly upon Rose's absence, and upon Reginald's unexpected return, repeatedly expressing surprise at her son Hubert's non-appearance.

"I think he and Rose must have lost themselves together on the moor," she said at last, with ill-timed gaiety, and a smile of would-be archness; "your dear wife is a sad coquette," and Mrs. Ralph wagged her head towards the returned traveller, in a way that made him suddenly long to wring her neck.

His wife a coquette! His little Rose whose blue eyes had never.—His own thoughts paused abruptly; he had forgotten, of course he had forgotten; it was not of his blue-eyed wife that Mrs. Metcalfe spoke, but of that woman at the cross-roads with the white, white face, and the eyes that held only misery, and remorse, and a great horror. Feeling curiously like an automaton wound up to do its work effectually, Reginald told the story of his miraculous escape from the savage tribe by

whom he had been taken captive—told of his weary journey to the coast, and finally of his voyage home; and whilst he talked, the shadows deepened outside the windows, the velvet darkness of night sank down upon Park and garden, and Jobson brought the lamps into the boudoir; and still neither Reginald's supposed wife, nor Hubert Metcalfe made their appearance.

Twenty times within the last hour, the Squire had left the room, to go down to the front door, and peer out into the darkness, and twenty times he came back, only to report a fruitless search.

"I cannot understand it at all," he said uneasily, more than once. "Rose is never late for tea. She is always so scrupulous, always so considerate. During all the time she has been with us, she has never before given us a moment's uneasiness."

"Your wife is a pattern of all the virtues, Reg," Mrs. Ralph remarked smoothly, with a laugh that did not ring quite true. "Your dear parents are quite wrapped up in her." Mrs. Metcalfe's gentle eyes turned towards her sister-in-law. She detected the acid under-current, below the apparently innocent words.

"We are indeed wrapped up in your Rose,

my darling boy," she said; "if you had left the choice to me, and I had hunted all over the universe, I think I could not have found you a sweeter wife, or one who would have made us love her more, than your Rose of all the world.'"

Silence was Reginald's only refuge, and fortunately anxiety about the non-return of her daughter-in-law made Mrs. Metcalfe continue speaking, without observing that her son had not answered her.

"I wish Rose would come home," she said, raising herself on her elbow and glancing uneasily towards the window, across which she had forbidden Jobson to draw the curtains; "it is far too dark for her to be wandering about country lanes alone, and we cannot be sure that Hubert is with her."

"I would go and look for the dear child, if I had the remotest notion which way to go," Mr. Metcalfe put in, "not that I think there is any cause for anxiety," he added, looking at his wife's flushed face and troubled eyes; "the country is extremely quiet about here; Rose has explored every lane in the neighbourhood and knows every inch of them. She probably walked further than she intended, and finds it takes her longer to get home than she realized. She does not

know what is waiting for her here." Mr. Metcalfe smiled, his glance resting tenderly on his son's face, and Reginald, with a feeling that the situation was becoming intolerable, rose from his seat and walked to the window.

"I should like to go and—and—meet her myself," he said hurriedly—his thoughts again reverting to the cross-roads, and the woman he had left standing there alone—"perhaps—I mean you mentioned the moors, would she be likely to have gone up there? I don't like to think she may be wandering about alone and miserable—and——"

"Miserable?" It was Mrs. Ralph who caught up the word that had inadvertently dropped from his lips, "Rosamund has not seemed to me very miserable lately, and if Hubert is with her, she will be quite safe."

Again that reference to Hubert. Reginald turned from the window, and looked curiously into the widow's thin, pinched face, whilst some words spoken to him by another woman only an hour or two before, came back to him with almost the force of a blow.

"Why do you speak of Hubert? Don't speak of him. I hate him. I wish he were dead." When the woman at the cross-roads had spoken to him that afternoon, it scarcely seemed as though she and Hubert were on

the friendly terms hinted at by Hubert's mother, and Reginald said shortly, and more sternly than he knew—

"We have no reason to suppose that she is with Hubert. I will go down the road and see if I can find her." With this speech, he left the room, and Mrs. Ralph pursed up her lips, and raised her eyebrows.

"Dear me, I hope I have not aroused dear Reginald's jealousy about Hubert," she said, "but it really surprised me that he did not suggest going to meet his wife ages ago. After coming back from the dead in this extraordinary way, I should have thought he would have wanted to scour the country to find her." Mrs. Metcalfe's face flushed again. Though precisely the same thought had crossed her own mind, it was unbearable to her that her sister-in-law should give voice to it, and her soft voice shook, as she answered—

"Reg naturally feels dazed and upset by all that has happened. You must remember it is three years since he has seen us, and all the circumstances of his home-coming have been abnormal. It is scarcely likely that he would wish to scour the country, in what would probably be a wild goose chase."

"I daresay he will meet Rose at the gate,"

Mr. Metcalfe interposed peaceably, "I allowed him to go without me, for I felt the two would like to meet alone, but it is difficult to let the boy out of one's sight, isn't it dear Heart?"

His eyes met his wife's, and the smile that passed between them, made Mrs. Ralph's hard and worldly heart contract. No one had ever looked at her with a glance so brimming over with love, as the glance that looked out of Mr. Metcalfe's eyes; no such smile of absolute sympathy and understanding had ever flitted over the face of another human being, when her glance met theirs.

"You must forgive us, Grace," Mrs. Metcalfe said gently, her attention caught by the expression on her sister-in-law's face; "we are very foolish old people. But Reginald is our one ewe lamb, and I think we both feel beside ourselves with happiness. You must forgive us—just to-day."

Mrs. Ralph smiled in response, but the smile was a sour one, and as she rose and left the room, it may be questioned whether her most predominant feeling was not one of bitter disappointment and chagrin. To her brother and sister-in-law, she had expressed herself as delighted that their son had been restored to them; she had even contrived to put a certain cordiality into her greeting of

Reginald himself; but in her soul there was no real rejoicing, only unfeigned regret. Reginald's return meant that her son was no longer heir to Mr. Metcalfe's fine estates: that all her schemes for Hubert's marriage with Reginald's widow were worse than useless, that all her hopes and plans must fall fruitless to the ground. She was in no sense of the word a bad woman, she would not willingly have hurt a fly; and she would have been horrified, scandalized, if any one had accused her of desiring the death of another human being. And yet, as she shut herself into her own room, and drew her writing materials towards her, preparatory to writing some letters, she knew that in the depths of her heart, she was not glad, but sorry that Reginald was alive, and at home again.

The subject of her bitter reflections was at that moment walking quickly down the drive, his own thoughts in a turmoil. He could not have explained, even to himself, what had driven him out into the darkness, to meet the woman who was not his wife, the woman whom he almost regarded as an enemy. Neither could he satisfactorily account to himself for his own silence regarding the fraud that same woman had perpetrated upon his father and

mother. Why had he not denounced her to them at once? Why had he allowed them to continue under the delusion that she was actually his wife, and their daughter-in-law, when, as a matter of fact, his own little Rose lay buried in some churchyard, the very name of which he did not know? His steps grew more hurried as these thoughts revolved in his brain, and his sorrow rose up and looked into his face.

Rose dead! His little wife dead and buried, and another woman masquerading in her place; and yet he had not unmasked that other woman. What had kept him silent? What strange power had seemed to prevent him from speaking and telling his people the plain unvarnished truth? He paused in his rapid walk, more than half determined to return forthwith to the house, and then and there to tell the truth. But some force stronger than his own determination held him back: with a stab of pain at his heart, he felt he could not tear the veil from his parents' eyes, could not give them the pain of knowing that the woman they loved and trusted was unworthy of both their love and trust.

"They must be told some day," he found himself muttering, as he turned out of the lodge gates into the road, "certainly they

must be told some day, but I shall break it to them by degrees. This woman has been good to them; she has won their love; she must be persuaded to go away—and then—by degrees, I will tell them the truth. Meanwhile——"

A sudden scurry of footsteps, and a sound of panting, laboured breathing, checked the current of his thoughts and words. He paused immediately outside the gates of the park, and peering through the gloom, became aware of a figure tearing headlong towards him.

"Oh! my—oh! my—oh! my," the figure gasped out in gasping terrified accents, and as it drew near, Reginald saw that it was a young labouring man, whose ashen face and shaking limbs showed every sign of overwhelming fear.

"What on earth is the matter?" Reginald called out, as the flying figure paused beside him, "have you seen a ghost, man? What in the world has happened?"

"Oh! mister, mister," the man cried breathlessly, "for the love of God come quickly. I dunno whatever I'll do, nor whatever the old squire will say. I've found Mr. Hubert up yonder in the lane by the moor, and he's dead, sir, stone dead—they've murdered him for sure."

CHAPTER XVI

WHERE WAS ALISON?

DESPATCHING the trembling messenger to the police station, and bidding him also fetch the nearest doctor, Reginald Metcalfe hurried back to the Hall to break the terrible news to the Squire, and to fetch help for the unfortunate Hubert. Whatever the truth of the yokel's story, it was obvious that Hubert must be in need—sore need of help, and with as much speed as possible, a carriage was got ready, and Reginald, the Squire himself, and a coachman and footman of the establishment, furnished with all necessary restoratives, drove out into the darkness.

To the ladies of the household the elder Mr. Metcalfe merely said that Hubert had met with an accident, the nature of which was uncertain; but that they were going at once to find and bring him home, and although the Squire's wife read more into her husband's

words than they seemed on the surface to imply, Mrs. Ralph, deceived by her brother-in-law's calmness of tone, was easily turned from her first purpose of going with the carriage.

"She must not come," Reginald whispered to his father, "she certainly must not come. God only knows what we may find," and Mr. Metcalfe dissuaded Hubert's mother from accompanying them, promising her that she should at once have tidings of what had happened.

"My poor boy, this is a sad home-coming for you," the old man said gently, as he and Reginald drove quickly along between the tall hedges, "no wife to greet you, and now this dreadful calamity! And where can Rose be?" No reply came immediately from the younger man. The rapid sequence of events following his arrival, had produced in him a stunned sensation; he felt incapable of realizing all the extraordinary facts which had come to his knowledge since he reached Minley, he could not shake off the deadly nightmare oppression which had haunted him, ever since he met Alison at the signpost a few hours earlier.

"A sad home-coming." Those words of his father reached his dulled consciousness,

and repeated themselves over and over again monotonously, with the noise of the carriage wheels.

"A sad home-coming; a sad home-coming; a sad home-coming!"

An inclination to laugh seized upon him, to laugh, or to cry aloud against the mockery of fate. To have escaped from the horrors he had endured in Central Africa, and to have reached home in safety, only to find his wife dead; another woman usurping her place; and now to be plunged into the midst of this terrible disaster, these did indeed sum up a home-coming that was sad to the point of tragedy.

"I am sorry we have not a better welcome for you, my dear son," Mr. Metcalfe's voice continued, when still Reginald remained silent, "it is so unlike Rose to be out as late as this. Her not coming home worries me."

"Perhaps we shall meet her," Reginald heard himself saying, whilst it was on the tip of his tongue to tell his father the whole truth.

"I only trust she was not with Hubert, when—when the accident happened," the older man faltered; "poor child, she has had enough to bear without any additional shock."

Before Reginald's eyes flashed again a quick vision of the woman by the signpost; of her white anguished face and agonized eyes, and with the vision too, came the remembrance of her words—

"Don't speak of Hubert—don't speak of him. I hate him. I wish he were dead." A feeling of physical sickness came over Reginald as these words rose unbidden to his mind, and throughout the remainder of the long dark drive they haunted him unceasingly. Why had she spoken them? What had she meant? Why had she looked so horror-stricken, so overwhelmed with fear? Surely it was not possible that she—he put the thought away, in a kind of terror, and tried to respond lucidly to his father's remarks, as they drove on and on between those tall hedges, which made the road so black and endless. At the cross roads, the coachman drew up for further directions which Reginald gave as clearly as he was able; but the man who had found Hubert had poured out so incoherent and confused a description of the locality to the young Squire, that the latter found it difficult to pass on the information with any definiteness. The carriage turned up the steep and stony lane, that same lane down which Alison had rushed with such

headlong speed earlier in the day, and for some minutes no sound was audible, but an occasional word of encouragement from the coachman to the horses, and the heavy breathing of the animals. Then Mr. Metcalfe exclaimed suddenly—

"Somebody is here already," and the search party saw that a group of men in whose hands swinging lanterns illuminated the hedges and their own faces, were toiling up the lane abreast of the carriage. Doctor Talbot, the local physician, two policemen, the man who had stopped Reginald at the gate of the drive, and two well-known villagers made up the party, and the doctor came to the side of the carriage, and talked to the two inmates in low shocked tones.

"I am afraid from what Joe Shakerley says that there has been bad work up here, Squire," he said; "luckily I was at home, and I came off at once." "No, no, I won't get in, thanks. This hill is a tolerable strain on your horses as it is, and I am glad to stretch my legs. I have been driving all day."

Silence dropped over the party again when the doctor's cheery voice ceased, and it seemed to Reginald that there was something ominous in the steady tramp, tramp of the men's feet, in the slow and rhythmic beat

of the horses' hoofs. It seemed to him also that hours had elapsed since they turned from the cross-roads, before, at a signal from Joe Shakerley, they pulled up with a jerk at a place where, by the flickering gleams of a lantern, a rough track could be descried, leading out upon the moor.

"'Tis nigh here he lies," Joe said to Metcalfe, after signing to the coachman to stop, "nigh here on the heather, by the foot-path."

The Squire's face was very white and still, as Doctor Talbot opened the carriage door. The old man alighted, and taking his son's arm followed the policemen and their swinging lanterns along the rough track. The night was very dark, and a sad little wind was sweeping over the great moors, moaning drearily in a clump of pine trees to the right of the path. Lowering clouds were piled up in the sky, and in the dimness the wide sweep of moor wore a peculiarly desolate appearance, the dimness emphasized, rather than diminished, by the long lines of light which the lanterns flung across the faded heather. The dreary moorland, the silent men, the gleaming lanterns, made up a sufficiently weird picture, and there seemed to be something inappropriate

and jarring in Joe Shakerley's voice, that all at once broke the stillness.

"Yonder he lies." Directly the man spoke, the policemen moved quickly forward, and Reginald, stepping a little in front of his father to break the shock for the older man, looked down at the ground, and uttered a low exclamation of dismay. The light held low in the foremost policeman's hand fell full upon Hubert's white upturned face, the widely opened eyes staring straight up into the dark sky, with so strange an expression of surprise and horror, that Reginald instinctively recoiled from it. That the crumpled form lying in so limp a heap, was that of a dead man, no one who glanced at him could for a moment doubt: and though Doctor Talbot knelt beside him, and laid a hand on his wrist and his heart, the words he spoke as he rose again from his knees, simply expressed what was a foregone conclusion.

"He must have been dead for some hours," he said, lifting his hat from his forehead, and gazing down at the still, white face, with its strangely horror-stricken look. "There is nothing to be done for him; he is dead."

Mr. Metcalfe grasped his son's arm and swayed a little. He had never felt any particular affection for Hubert, he had in fact

rather disliked his nephew: but after all, the man who lay there, his face upturned to the sky, was his own brother's son, and this sudden and awful death swept away all small prejudices, swept into oblivion all Hubert's faults and failings, all that had irritated his uncle against him.

"Was he—was the death due to an accident?" the Squire asked tremulously. "The look on his face is so—terrible."

The doctor had knelt down once more beside the dead man, and was examining the limp body as well as the uncertain light would permit. For the fraction of a second he paused, before answering Mr. Metcalfe's question, then he lifted his head, and answered, with even more than his former gravity—

"I am afraid there has been no accident here: Mr. Hubert has been most foully done to death; he was stabbed—stabbed to death with this." So saying, he held up to view a small dagger, stained with the dead man's blood, a dagger whose quaint silver handle set with uncut stones, was both handsome and unique.

"As deadly a weapon as you could find," the doctor went on, peering closely at the blade, "and it has been sent home with terrible force," he added, "up to the hilt in

the poor fellow's heart." The last words were spoken in an undertone to Reginald, who could only murmur under his breath, "My God, but who could have done such a ghastly thing?"

Who indeed? Ah! who indeed? That question never left Reginald's mind, through all the hours that followed the dreadful discovery. Who could have done it? And why? And, mingling with the question, came over and over again the memory of those haunting words that refused to be dismissed from his mind—

"Don't talk to me of Hubert, don't talk of him. I hate him. I wish he was dead."

In all the turmoil and misery of that night, the newly returned traveller was the person to whom every one turned for help; and the person upon whom the whole household instinctively leant. The Squire seemed too crushed and dazed by the calamity to be able to take any prominent part in the sad proceedings; everything was delegated to his son. Mrs. Metcalfe, overwhelmed though she had been by the shock and horror of the tidings which Reginald gently broke to her, set herself aside as was her wont, and spent the long night hours in soothing and comforting the dead man's mother, whose alter-

nations of hysterical grief, and wild denunciations against Hubert's murderer, were most painful to hear. And to add to the distraction and anxiety of the already distraught household, Rosamund did not come home. By their intense anxiety and trouble over her non-appearance, Reginald gauged the real affection his parents felt for the girl who had been to them like a daughter; and in his own love and pity for them he could not endure the thought of adding to their present grief, by revealing the truth to them now. The ceaseless question put to him by his father, "Where can Rose be? What can have happened to her?" showed him more and more plainly how deeply the usurper had endeared herself to the old man, and though terrible suspicions crowded into his mind, he could not give voice to them to himself, much less could he speak them aloud.

Why had the girl disappeared so entirely, the girl with the white face and the grey anguished eyes. Was it only because she had not dared to return to the Hall to face the truth about herself? Or had she fled from the place for some more awful reason? Those two questions remained unanswered in Reginald's mind, and long after the rest of the household had sunk into silence, he

paced his room restlessly, trying in vain to solve the problems which had been so strangely, and so suddenly, thrust upon him.

His wife's death, and the manner in which another woman had usurped and filled her place—these two bewildering facts which had loomed so large before his consciousness a few hours earlier, seemed now to have sunk into a dreamlike remoteness. Hubert's murder, and the question by whom he had been murdered, filled the whole foreground of his thoughts.

"I hate him . . . I wish he were dead." Reginald's restless pacing ceased, he flung open his window, and leant far out into the night, feeling suddenly that he could not breathe in the confined space of his room.

"I hate him. . . . I wish he were dead." The white face by the signpost seemed to gaze at him out of the darkness, the grey eyes with their wistful pleading seemed to implore his understanding and forgiveness, yet her voice echoed in his ears.

"I hate him. . . . I wish he were dead."

"But she could not have killed him," he exclaimed aloud, giving voice at last to all the startling suspicions that would not be kept back; "it is impossible, unthinkable. She

could not have killed him, I would stake my life on that!"

A chilly morning of wind and wet succeeded that night of horror, and it was between dark and dripping hedges that the Squire and his son drove down to the inquest held in the village inn upon the unfortunate Hubert.

The inquest was necessarily short, the facts known were of the briefest: but the medical testimony was amply sufficient to prove that Hubert Metcalfe had been murdered, stabbed to death by a Circassian dagger with a silver and jewelled hilt.

In the crowded room no doubt was felt as to the verdict of the jury. It must infallibly be "wilful murder against some person or persons unknown." Nothing else was possible, and people had already begun to move, and try to extricate themselves from the packed rows of humanity that filled the room to overflowing, when the voice of a juror made itself heard, and arrested the attention of the crowd.

"I should like to ask, sir," was the question addressed to the coroner, "whether it is true that Mrs. Reginald Metcalfe disappeared yesterday afternoon, about the time of the murder? And whether anything has been

heard of her since?" An electric thrill ran through the assembly. This was a sensation indeed, a sensation as startling as it was unexpected, and a flash of faces was turned towards the two Metcalfes, father and son, when the coroner gravely recalled Reginald as a witness.

"Can you reply to the question just asked, Mr. Metcalfe?" he said. "Was your wife absent from home at the time of the murder?" The silence following the slowly spoken words was so intense, that the ticking of a clock in some adjoining room became distinctly audible, and it almost seemed as if the closely packed audience scarcely dared to breathe. Then, across the stillness, Reginald's voice spoke, quiet, firm, unfaltering—

"She was out when the murder took place."

"And she has since returned?"

"No—she has not returned."

"No doubt you can tell us where she is—when you expect her home again?" A second's hesitation, and Reginald's voice spoke clearly.

"I cannot tell you anything of her. We do not know where she is, or when she will come back."

Ungovernable amazement was expressed

by a sudden subdued rustling and whispering, and then came another breathless stillness, whilst the coroner read a note handed in to him by one of the constables. He read it through twice, and a deep line appeared upon his forehead, as he laid it on the table before him.

"Have you any reason to suppose that your wife was with Mr. Hubert Metcalfe yesterday afternoon?"

"I only arrived at the Hall at four o'clock," Reginald answered, no trace of his inward perturbation showing in his accents, "no one there knew where she had gone." An instinct he could neither explain nor account for, was leading him to try and shield the missing woman, and as he uttered the prevaricating words of which he had just been guilty, he found himself wondering whether his prevarication would serve its purpose. The cabman who drove him from the station had seen the exhausted woman on the grass by the cross-roads; had watched her talk to him; might conceivably have known her as Rosamund Metcalfe. What if the cabman should come forward now and declare that he and his wife had met by the signpost? What retort could he make? How account for that prevarication which had risen so glibly

to his lips? Had he known it, he need not have feared, for by one of those strange coincidences which are far more frequent in real life than is commonly supposed, the cabman who had driven Reginald from the station, had, that same evening been summoned to a dying mother in Scotland; he had left the neighbourhood before even the tidings of the murder reached him, and he was little in the habit of studying the newspapers. Hence there was no voice to contradict Reginald, or to point out that he had not given a direct reply to the coroner's question.

"You are making some effort to trace her?" It was the coroner's voice again, and this time Reginald's answer came quickly.

"Certainly. We are doing our utmost to find her. We are afraid lest something should have happened to her also on the moor. Her disappearance is a profound, he had been about to say 'mystery,' but instead he substituted the word 'anxiety' to us all."

"If—as is supposed," the coroner picked up the note from the table, and again glanced at its contents, "if, as is asserted, Mrs. Reginald Metcalfe was seen in the lane yesterday with your cousin, her testimony is of overwhelming importance. The inquiry

will be adjourned, until she can be brought forward as a witness."

The dramatic and unexpected conclusion had at first a silencing effect upon the tongues of those, who before the recalling of Reginald Metcalfe, had begun to discuss the case. The crowd filed quietly out of the room, and only when they were in the street did the men and women who had listened to the evidence begin to chatter freely.

"It looks queer—it looks very queer," more than one person remarked; "why should young Mrs. Metcalfe have vanished in such an uncanny way, just at a moment when the family was in such trouble?"

"There must be something more in this than meets the eyes," said others; "surely it was too remarkable to be merely a coincidence, that Mr. Hubert Metcalfe should be murdered, and his cousin's wife disappear on the same day. There must be some connexion between the two occurrences—otherwise why should they have happened in this way?"

Why, indeed? It was the question the Squire was anxiously asking his son, as they drove home together after the inquest; the question Reginald had been asking himself for hours, and yet no answer was forthcoming.

"Our dear gentle Rose," the old man

almost moaned, "if anything has happened to her I think your mother will die, Reg, I really do think so. And my poor boy what must you be feeling?" he went on, his eyes fixed on his son's haggard face and troubled eyes. "To have this anxiety added to all the rest is hard upon you. We have no business to look at things only from our own selfish standpoint, it is ten thousand times worse for you, my dear fellow. You have lost your wife before you even saw her again, and we are laying all our troubles on your shoulders into the bargain." Reginald tried to speak; even tried to say that the loss of his wife, his pretty Rose, dated much further back than yesterday. But the words died on his lips as they had died every time he attempted to speak them, and the dumb glance of entreaty he turned towards his father, was totally misinterpreted by the Squire.

"We must hope for the best, dear lad," he said, resting his hand caressingly on Reginald's knee, "we must trust in God, and hope for the best. Surely our dear Rose will be given safely back to us and to you; I cannot believe that anything has happened to her. We shall find our dear Rose again, your Rose and ours, I am sure of that, I am quite sure of that!"

CHAPTER XVII

"DO THEY STILL BELIEVE IN ME?"

IN the barest of bare attics on the Surrey side of the river, a woman sat alone. The roar of the traffic in the Westminster Bridge Road came to her through the half-open window, and every quarter of an hour Big Ben's deep chime shook the bed on which she sat, each echoing note dying away in a thousand vibrations. She was doing nothing: only sitting with clasped hands, looking at the grey strip of sky visible above the opposite roofs, despair in the very droop of her slight figure, despair in the glance of her grey eyes. Beyond a bed, a shaky table, and a shabby old washstand, the room was guiltless of furniture, and not even a strip of carpet covered the bare, and not over clean boards. The remains of a meal were on the table—a very scanty meal judging by those same remains. A stale scrap of bread, an egg shell, and an empty tea cup, these were all that was

left of Alison Dering's mid-day dinner: and a little bitter smile crossed her face, as her eyes dropped from the dreary prospect outside the window, to the yet drearier prospect within.

"My sin has found me out," she said, "and history is repeating itself. This is almost exactly what I did in the Southampton lodging-house, six months ago," and as she spoke, she drew a purse from her pocket and emptied its contents upon her lap, "only the purse is not so shabby," she added, turning over in her hand the dainty Russia leather portmonnaie, which had been one of Mrs. Metcalfe's last presents to her. "That other purse was a poor little bit of a thing compared to this; I remember I bought it for myself for ninepence—and this"—she was too miserable to cry, but the memories evoked by the sight of the purse in her hand, made her break off her sentence, and gaze dully out of the window again, whilst her thoughts travelled back to her peaceful life at the Hall, to Mrs. Metcalfe's motherly tenderness, and the Squire's watchful care.

"I wonder what they are thinking about me now?" she reflected sorrowfully, never doubting but that Reginald would have told them the whole story of her deception on the

day of his home-coming. Nearly a fortnight had passed since that day, and Alison's heart ached with the longing for tidings of those she had learnt to love. When Reginald left her at the cross-roads, her first instinct had been one of flight, and of flight to London, where she felt sure she could bury herself effectually, and for ever, from those whom she had wronged. Her purse was fortunately in her pocket, fortunately too it had contained sufficient money to pay for her ticket, and to keep her for a short time in the cheap and dreary lodging-house, whose address an old servant had long ago given her. But now the moment had come when her resources were nearly at an end, when, indeed, she knew she could neither pay another week's rent, nor feed herself during that coming week.

And she had spent a fortnight in a wearisome search for work that had proved utterly fruitless! The managers of work agencies looked askance at the tall woman in black; who could produce no references, whose account of her latest situations sounded lame and unconvincing; who could not even give the name of one householder, as a guarantee of her respectability. Only that very morning, the sharp-faced lady who sat in the inner office of a

woman s employment bureau, had looked at her with unpleasantly searching glances, saying—

"I am sorry Miss—er—Dering—but you give such a very halting and uncertain account of yourself, and of your latest work, that I could not possibly put your name on our books. I really must know more about my clients than you seem able to tell me of yourself. This is your own name, I presume?"

Alison would have given all she possessed to be able to meet those gimlet-like eyes calmly, but her own wavered, the colour flew into her face, and her manifest confusion neutralized the effect of her low spoken—

"Yes—oh! yes—Alison Dering is my name."

"I am sorry I can do nothing for you," came the quick response, indicating to the shrinking girl, what was indeed the case, that the lady of the bureau did not in the least believe her statement.

The same thing, or very much the same thing, had occurred, when she made an effort to obtain a situation as a shop assistant. Either no vacancy was available, or heads were shaken over her want of references; and it seemed to her as she sat in her attic-room,

staring out at the desolate sky, that every resource had come at last to an end, that nothing now stood between her and the workhouse.

"I am punished," she exclaimed, rising from her seat on the lowly bed, and moving nearer the window. "I squeezed myself into a Paradise to which I had no right, no right at all, and now I am thrust out of it for ever. I have made him despise me too," she added, with apparent irrelevance, "Reg—if you had only known, if you had only known, I wonder—would you have forgiven me?"

The grey house roofs opposite her window, the leaden sky, the serried rows of chimney-tops, these all vanished from her eyes, and she saw instead, the room which had been hers at the Hall: the pretty room with its dainty luxurious appointments—saw, above all, the picture above the bureau, Reg's picture, whose steadfast face, and gravely tender eyes, had seemed to her like the face of her guardian angel. She wrung her hands together in a paroxysm of pain, and the vision suddenly shifted. She was standing again by the cross-roads, looking up into the face of the actual man whose picture had been so much to her; but the man's face was

sterner than the picture's, and the words he spoke, scorched her with remorse and anguish. And yet, through all the pain and remorse, she knew that as she had learnt to love the man in the picture, so also she could love the man himself, if only—if only——

A quick tap on the door interrupted her strange reflections, and turning as the door opened, Alison found herself confronted by her landlady's heated and unamiable visage.

"Look here, Miss Dering, there's a gentleman downstairs asking if I've got a lodger here, name of Mrs. Reginald Metcalfe, and though I told him I didn't know no such name, he says perhaps you've given another name here. I should like to know if that's true?"

Alison's face could not grow whiter than it already was, but she started and shivered, staring dumbly at Mrs. Mayne's hot and angry visage. Had they found her? she wondered, and what would they do to punish her for having committed such a fraud? Would they——

"I should be glad if you'd be kind enough to answer my question," Mrs. Mayne said sourly, aware of every change in the girl's expressive face, "having kept myself respectable, and not being used to having lodgers

with more than one name, I should be glad to come to some understanding about this."

"I don't want to deceive you," Alison said wearily. After all, she thought, if they had discovered her, and meant to punish her for what she had done, she could not help it. She would tell no more lies, attempt no more deceptions. "I am—I mean—I have been known by the name of Mrs. Reginald Metcalfe. I——" The woman tossed her head.

"It's not what I've been accustomed to in this house," she said, "having been always respectable, and keeping myself to myself, and the house quiet and all it should be, such conduct I should not have expected from a lady like yourself." Mrs. Mayne invariably entangled herself in a network of phrases, whose meaning was far from clear to her listeners. "Should I ask the gentleman to come up if you please?"

"Yes—oh! yes," Alison involuntarily wrung her hands, with a little gesture of despair, not lost on Mrs. Mayne, who looked at her sharply and said—

"And you'll understand that I should wish to give you notice to leave this room. I've always been most particular, and kept my house so as no man, woman, or child

could say a word against it, which I should not like now they should find——"

"I shall be leaving you in any case," Alison interrupted, a faint irritation in her tones. "I was going to tell you so to-day."

"Oh! was you indeed, my fine lady?" Mrs. Mayne muttered, as she clattered down the three flights of stairs to the front door. "Going of your own accord, was you, I wonder? Or going because you couldn't help yourself? I wonder now whatever you have been up to, taking false names and calling yourself first Mrs., and then Miss. Pretty goings on, and no mistake neither. But there, you can't never be upsides with gentle-spoken, gentle-looking lady-like young women!"

Alison, left alone, stood just where her landlady had left her, close to the rickety table, her eyes fixed on the door, her mind in a turmoil. Who had been sent to find her, was the question she asked herself, and what power would they have to punish her? Well! punishment would be welcome, would be something for which to be thankful. Anything would be more endurable than the agony of remorse that had lately been gnawing at her heart; and if the Metcalfes intended to hand

her over to the police, as, in her ignorance of the law, she supposed might be possible, she would be glad, yes, glad to have an opportunity of expiating her sin.

A step sounded on the creaking stairs, a man's firm step, and Alison braced herself as though to meet a blow, when the door of the room again opened, and Reginald Metcalfe stood on the threshold, looking at her with gravely reproachful eyes. With a little cry she drew back against the table, clutching at it for support, her startled eyes fixed on Reginald's face.

"You?" she faltered, "you?—How did you find me?"

It was not the question she intended to have asked him, it leapt unbidden to her lips, and her eyes grew wider and more startled, as she saw the set sternness of his face. Before he made any attempt to answer her question, Reginald came right into the room, and shut the door carefully behind him; then advancing towards the shrinking form by the table, said in a low voice, and with no preliminary words of greeting—

"I found this address in an address book in your desk, which I ventured to open, and I came here on the chance of finding you. But that does not matter so much as what I

have come to say to you, and there is no time to be lost."

The words were spoken quickly, imperatively, the austere lines of his face did not relax, and his eyes lost none of their severity, as they scanned her face.

"No time to be lost? Why do you say that? Why have you come? Are you going to punish me for—for what I did?" Alison's voice dropped to a frightened whisper.

"There is no time to lose," came the quick reply, "because I am afraid the police are already on your track—and I——"

"*The—police?* Are you so angry with me that you have got the police to help you? Has my deceit towards you all, made you as angry as that?"

"There is no question of the police helping *us*," Reginald answered; "I have come here to-day to beg you—to forestall their finding you, and to tell them the truth. Believe me, it will be far better for you in the long run, and will serve your interests best."

"But I have told the truth," Alison answered, bewilderment replacing the startled look in her eyes. "I told you the whole truth, on that dreadful afternoon by the signpost. I hid nothing from you then. I told you everything there was to tell, about my deception."

"But you did not tell me all there was to tell about the murder of my cousin, Hubert," Reginald answered slowly, his eyes never leaving the girl's face, "and it is to ask you about him, that I have come to you to-day."

Alison's face had been white before, but as these words fell upon her ears, every vestige of colour in her cheeks and lips faded away, leaving them the colour of death. A great fear looked out of her eyes.

"Hubert — murdered?" The words dropped from her lips in a horror-stricken whisper, her hands that clutched at the table, grasped it so tightly, that the rough wood tore her delicate flesh, "*Hubert—murdered?*"

Her ghastly face, the horror in her eyes and voice, and the sudden swaying of her form, awoke afresh in Reginald some of the pity he had felt for Alison when they had first met, and with more kindness in his tones than he had yet shown, he said—

"All this time you and I have been talking at cross purposes. I did not mean to give you such a shock, but did you not know—have you not seen in the papers that Hubert was found dead in the heather on that afternoon when—you and I first met."

"No—I knew nothing," she shuddered, and

glanced round her fearfully, speaking in a frightened whisper. "Was it—did the fall——" She broke off, shivering so uncontrollably, that Reginald, for very humanity, put his arm about her, and said very gently—

"Will you tell me all that did happen between you and Hubert on that afternoon? Tell me quickly, for time is very short, but tell me the whole truth." His repetition of these two words seemed to strike upon Alison's senses with strange force; she drew away from his supporting arm, and looked full into his face.

"Why do you say that again?" she asked. "I told you the truth before; I am not the kind of person who deceives people; only that once—that once I did it, when I took your wife's name, but I was never untruthful before." Her head drooped, her voice died away, a deep flush of shame died the whiteness of her face.

"Never mind the other matter," Reginald said quickly, "but tell me all that passed between you and Hubert. This is a matter of life and death; don't you understand that?"

"Of life and death?——"

"My God—yes—don't you understand? When Hubert's body was found: when it

was suggested that you might have been with him in the lane: when, finally, you disappeared on the day of the murder, suspicion was directed against you—and——"

"Against me? Do they think I killed him? Do they think I meant to kill him when—when—I pushed him?" Her words came rapidly; uttering them, she panted for breath, and again that awful look of fear was in her eyes. Reginald's eyes, which had left her face, came back to it with a strangely searching glance.

"You pushed him?" he questioned, and Alison was too excited and overwrought to observe and understand the accent of relief in his tones.

"It was all too horrible," she answered; "I hated him: I always hated him. He tried to make love to me; he wanted me to marry him," she shivered again, "day after day he persecuted me."

"But why did you let him annoy you?" Reginald interrupted. "Why did you not appeal to my father for help and protection?"

"Because—he—Hubert, discovered my secret; he found out about my fraud. He brought a friend to see me—who did know—Rose, and though I wanted then to tell your father the truth, Hubert persuaded me to be

silent. He said it would hurt the dear old people if I told them; and I—listened to him and did not speak."

"And he used his knowledge as a hold over you? He persecuted you all the more, when he knew the truth?"

"Yes. And that day—that dreadful Thursday, I tried to escape from him. I thought I had eluded him. I wanted to go by myself on to the moorland and try to think out what was right to do. And—Hubert followed me. It was so horrible," she repeated, breaking off with another of those shudders, which shook her from head to foot.

"He insulted you?" Reginald asked the question, shortly and sternly, and Alison bent her head affirmatively.

"He begged me again to be his wife," she whispered, "and I refused. I told him I hated him—and then—he put his arms round me, and kissed me. I think I felt like a wild beast. No man had ever insulted me like that before, and anger and fear made me strong. I pushed him away from me, I pushed him with all my might—and—I think he fell. But I did not want to see, I was too frightened to look back, too frightened to do anything but run down the lane, without ever

looking behind me. And—you know the rest."

"Yes—I know the rest," Reginald answered gravely, "but——"

"Did it kill him?" Alison said, in tones of awestruck horror, "did the fall kill him? I was angry, I hated him—but I never wanted to—kill him." The ashen look crept over her face again, and Reginald put his hand gently on her shoulder.

"No—no," he said quickly, "don't look like that. You did not kill him. The push you gave him, could not have done him any real injury. His death came to him in quite another way; he was stabbed to the heart with a dagger!"

After the unexpected shock of hearing that she was suspected of Hubert's murder, the shock of relief was so great, that Alison's slight form swayed a little towards Reginald, and would have fallen, had not his arm again held her firmly. It was several seconds before she had recovered herself sufficiently to speak, and when words at last came to her, she could only pant out—

"I said I wished he was dead, but I did not mean it. I did not want him to die. It is like a judgment on me!"

Reginald seated her gently in the one chair

the room possessed, and then said soothingly—

"You must not feel like that about it. What happened to Hubert, happened through no fault of yours, and I am thankful, more than thankful, that I have found you to-day, and heard your own story.

"You believe me?" she questioned, leaning forward, and scanning his face eagerly, "you believe that I did not dream of hurting Hubert?"

"I believe you absolutely, and I want to help you, I have come here to help you. But tell me one thing more. Why did you disappear that day from Minley? Why did you go away and leave no trace behind you? Because of your doing that, suspicion has been aroused."

Alison sat upright in her chair, and stared at him.

"Did you think I was running away because Hubert had been killed?" she said. "I never knew that anything had happened to Hubert until you told me so to-day. I ran away—because—I could not bear to face—your father and mother, after they had heard how I had deceived them. I knew you were going to tell them the truth about me; I could not bear to think of their sorrow, and I ran away."

"I have never told them the truth about you," Reginald said slowly

"You never told them? Do they still believe in me?" a little choking sob ended the sentence, Alison's eyes filled with tears. "Why were you so good to me?"

"It was not goodness to you," Reginald answered with a return to his former sternness. "I could not bear to face the old people's sadness. I found out how much they loved and leant upon you; I found that you had been a daughter, and more than a daughter to them. Call it weakness, folly—call it what you will, I could not destroy their love and faith in you."

"Then—what do they think—now? Do they believe I—murdered Hubert?"

Reginald shook his head vehemently.

"They will not believe a single word that is said against you. Hubert's mother is very bitter, and inclined to suspect, as do the police, that you were instrumental in her son's death. But my father and mother have unshaken faith in you."

"Then why do they think I came away as I did?"

"My dear mother made up her mind that some terrible thing must have happened to you, as well as Hubert. She has endured

tortures of suspense and anxiety, and I believe every inch of the moors has been searched for you. You see, no one knows that you and I met at the cross-roads."

"But the cabman who drove your fly? Surely he would have told what he saw."

"By one of those extraordinary coincidences that do occasionally happen, he left Minley on the very day he drove me from the station. He was summoned to a dying relative in the north, and only a few days ago, I casually heard that the man was never coming back, but was going out to Canada. No one need ever know that you and I met at the cross-roads. No one must ever know it, or the whole truth about you might come out, and at all costs that must be avoided."

"Avoided?" Alison looked helplessly up at him, "but indeed I cannot go on living a lie. I could not bear to deceive your father and mother any longer. To pretend—to go on pretending to be your wife," again she flushed deeply, "would be an impossibility."

"To go on *pretending*—yes," he answered shortly, "I have come here to-day to put an end to pretence. I have come to say to you, that for the old people's sake, you must marry me in good earnest; you must come back with me to the Hall to-morrow as my wife."

CHAPTER XVIII

"I BELIEVE IT ENTIRELY"

"IT is out of the question," Alison cried, springing to her feet, and drawing away from him to the furthest corner of the room, her cheeks aflame, her hands trembling nervously; "you hate me, you despise me—and yes—you come and tell me coldly and sternly that I must marry you. It is out of the question!"

"Don't give me an answer in a hurry," Reginald said more gently; "hear me out. I am not making the suggestion impulsively, or because I think it can be any more pleasing to you than it is to me—but——"

"If it is not pleasing to either of us—to suggest it is almost an insult," Alison interrupted quickly, her eyes blazing fiercely.

"To insult you is the last thing I should wish to do," was the grave retort, "it would be absurd to pretend that there could be anything approaching to affection between

us, and it is only due to you to be absolutely frank with you. I should not pretend to have any feeling for you other than that of pity. But my father and mother are the whole world to me. They have had so much sorrow in their lives, and I cannot bear to add to their sorrow by letting them know what you have done. This is the reason of my suggestion."

"It is impossible," Alison faltered, but there was no resentment in her voice, and her eyes no longer blazed; "it would be an impossible position for us both. We——"

"I—you will forgive me if I speak quite plainly? We should be husband and wife in name only, and it would be clearly understood between us that neither you nor I would ever wish to overstep the bounds of mere conventional politeness." Reginald's voice had grown stern once more. "I cannot pretend to ignore, or to forget, all that has happened; but for the sake of the old people who love you, and whom I believe you love, I want you to do this thing."

There was silence in the room after Reginald's stern masterful voice ceased, and he stood quietly looking out of the window at the grey houses opposite, whilst Alison revolved his proposition in her mind, furtively

watching his face as she did so. Her heart was beating so fast, that she felt as if every beat must choke her; she was beset by a wild desire to laugh, to cry, or to do both at once; her hands moved restlessly. The face whose profile was turned towards her was so precisely the face that for four months had looked down upon her from the walls of her room, the face to which she had grown into a strange habit of appealing for help and advice, that even at this moment the whimsical idea crossed her brain that she could appeal for counsel to the silent man by the window.

To marry him? To go back to the Hall as his wife—his wife in name only? Could any one have invented a more refined punishment for her sin than this? The longing to laugh or to cry nearly overcame her, and she choked back both laugh and sob with difficulty.

"I learnt to love his pictured face," so her thoughts ran, "and now—I know that the man himself is the same as his pictured face, and I—love him. I sinned—and I am going to be punished with a punishment worse than any I could have dreamt of—I——"

"You fully understand my proposition?" Reginald turned back from the window.

"I make it, simply because I cannot bear to hurt my poor old parents, or to give them more sorrow. It will be a difficult position for us both, for me as well as for you; but—I am afraid, at the risk of seeming hard, I must say it—the position has arisen out of all that happened in the past."

"I know," Alison said brokenly, "I know—I understand that the fault is all mine, and that this is to be the expiation. I cannot say no to what you ask of me, when I know it is for the sake of the only two people who have loved me, and been good to me since I was a child. However hard everything is in the future, I know I have deserved it all."

"I am afraid there will be trouble and difficulty ahead of you about Hubert's death," Reginald said gently, his pity for the girl roused afresh, when he saw how worn and wan her face seemed to have grown in the fortnight since he had seen her at the cross-roads. "Your safest and wisest course will be to come back with me to the Hall at once, and to face the accusation that will be made against you. And before we go back, you must be legally my wife." Again a flood of crimson swept over her face.

"But how"—she faltered.

"I thought it all out before I came here."

Reginald interrupted her faltering speech. "As you have agreed to do what I suggest, for the sake of the two old people who love you, who love us both, I intend to get a special licence immediately, and we must be married as soon as possible. There is no time to lose. The police may find you at any moment, and I want you to be safely back at the Hall, as my wife, before they discover your whereabouts." His masterfulness had the effect of sweeping her off her feet, she felt powerless to argue with him, powerless to resist him.

"An intimate friend of mine is vicar of a church in this neighbourhood," Reginald continued. "I went to him last night, and laid the whole case before him; he will be ready to perform the ceremony directly I get the licence for him, and he asked me if I found you to take you to the vicarage whenever you liked, in order that you might not have to remain alone in these lodgings."

Tears sprang to Alison's eyes. "It is good of him," she said simply, "good of him, and good of you. I will do whatever you wish. In any case I—I was leaving these rooms to-day .I—could not afford to stay here."

"*Could not afford to stay here?*" Reginald looked at her seriously, and with a more

searching glance than he had as yet bestowed upon her. "Do you mean to say that you have been in actual difficulty?" he asked quickly, a sudden conviction crossing his mind that she had been in greater straits than he had guessed.

"It is not the first time I have known poverty and difficulty," she answered, smiling faintly; "it—it was because I was so poor, so deadly poor, and with no hope for the future, and no prospect of work, that I first thought of—my fraud." Her voice sank to a whisper, she turned uneasily away from his searching eyes.

Once more pity for the woman overcame in Reginald his repugnance to the deceit the woman had practised; he was chivalrous to all women, and for women who had suffered his heart was very tender. His hand rested again on her shoulder, as it had done twice before during this strange interview.

"You shall not ever be poor any more, if we can help it. I am afraid——" he hesitated—"I am afraid there may be a time of—of unpleasantness for you, until we can prove that you knew nothing of poor Hubert's death. But when that time is over, you must be a daughter to my mother, as you have been before."

"*You* believe that I knew nothing of Hubert's death?" she asked quickly, ignoring the remainder of his speech, and looking at him with wistful, anxious eyes.

"I believe it entirely," he answered, "I would stake my own honour on your innocence. I shall do my utmost to have it proved before the eyes of the whole world. And now you must come with me—we will see and settle with your shrewish landlady, and you shall rest at St. Clement's Vicarage, until I come for you with the marriage licence."

CHAPTER XIX

"HE CANNOT HURT ME NOW."

IN all the years of her not uneventful life, Alison felt that she had never experienced such strange and dream-like sensations as those which beset her during the course of the hours that followed. Mr. Baynes, the vicar of St. Clement, was goodness itself to her, and his sister, an elderly kindly lady accustomed to receive all her brother's guests without question or comment, made her welcome, and established her in a small cosy room to rest quietly. No one worried her with questions, no one seemed surprised either at her coming, or at the errand which had brought her.

Miss Baynes now and then came in and out of the room, always with a bright word and kindly smile, and at one o'clock a dainty lunch was served to the tired overwrought girl, who was intensely grateful that she was not invited to take part in a general meal.

"My brother and I felt you would prefer to be alone," Miss Baynes said to her when, later on, she came in again to her guest; "you have so much to go through, that I am sure you do not wish to be bothered by strangers. Now just tell me quite frankly, would you like me to come to the church with you, or no? Would it be any help or comfort to you to have another woman? or shall I be in the way?"

Alison looked gratefully into the plain kindly face.

"I should like you to come," she said; "I feel as if I was in the middle of some extraordinary dream, and everything has taken me by surprise. Please come to the church if you will be so kind."

So it was that Miss Baynes formed one of the small cortège which the next day walked from the Vicarage to the church on the other side of the road: Reginald and the Vicar in front, Alison and Miss Baynes bringing up the rear, the whole party viewed by the clerk who met them at the church door with surprise not altogether unmixed with disapproval. Marriages by special licence did not come much in his way, and the inhabitants of that crowded and squalid district were more usually married

by banns than by any sort of licence at all. The dream-like sensation which had haunted Alison ever since her interview with Reginald haunted her more and more as she moved up the church by Miss Baynes' side. Still feeling like a person in a dream, she paused at the foot of the chancel steps, where Reginald stood awaiting her, and it was mechanically, rather than with any definite thought of what she was doing, that she drew off her gloves, preparatory to the ceremony. Perhaps it was not altogether surprising that the clerk stared curiously at the couple about to be married,—the tall bronzed man with so sternly set a face; and the woman in the deep mourning that bore such a close resemblance to a widow's.

"Might a' put on a bit o' colour to be married in, even if she is a widow," was the worthy man's thought, expressed later in the day to his wife; "looked uncommonly queer to *me*, sort-o' turned me up, as you may say, to see a woman come to her wedding with number two, in the mourning she was wearing for number one."

To her clothes Alison herself did not give even a passing thought: her whole soul was too absorbed in what was taking place, to allow her to consider whether or no she was

suitably clad for the occasion. A little mist seemed to creep before her eyes, there was an odd singing in her ears, as the first solemn words of that most solemn of services echoed round the empty building; and instinctively rather than intentionally she drew a shade closer to her bridegroom. Reginald's eyes were fixed straight in front of him, towards the cross above the altar—he never once glanced at the woman beside him, until he took her hand in his, preparatory to taking the oath which was to bind them together. Then, and then only, his eyes fell upon her white downcast face, and as he realized how limply her hand rested in his, and how she shrank a little away from him, a gleam of pity came into the stern gravity of his eyes.

"I, Reginald Michael, take thee, Alison, to be my wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish till death us do part, according to God's holy ordinance, and thereto I plight thee my troth."

The words were firmly uttered, the voice was strong and vibrating, yet Alison still felt that she was only part of a strange dream, from which presently she must awake to the realities of commonplace existence. Even

her own voice, as she in turn vowed to love and cherish the man by her side, till death should part them, sounded to her like some dream voice, or that of some totally different person, not Alison Dering's voice at all.

"Till Death us do part," she said, and saying it, shivered. "Till death parted them." Why, Reginald had only just come back from death—had only been given to her at all because he was dead, and now—now she was promising to love him until death parted them again. Her confused chaotic thoughts were broken up and scattered, when Reginald's hand once more took hers, and she realized, as through a mist of bewilderment, that the wedding ring was being placed upon her finger. She was assailed by a sudden, and almost uncontrollable, desire to laugh, when she saw the gold circle on her finger, where for four months there had rested the ring she had bought for herself. That ring was now safely hidden away in the innermost recesses of her purse—it meant nothing, it was only the sign of a fraud; but this other, this ring that was being slowly placed on her finger by a strong brown hand, was significant of so much, that again she drew a long gasping breath.

Then the dream-like mist seemed to close

round her once more, and Mr. Baynes' voice sounded like a faint buzzing in her ears, until after a silence whose impressiveness marked the words that followed, she heard the clergyman say slowly and gravely—

"I pronounce that they be man and wife together—in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost—Amen."

Man—and—wife? Reginald's hand closed over hers again, Alison lifted her downcast face, and looked up at the man beside her, and their eyes met in a long grave glance.

His wife? Was she really the wife of this man with the stern grey eyes, this man who was leading her away from the chancel steps towards the vestry? Was it possible that the solemn service in which she had just taken part was actual and real, or was it merely a figment of her own disordered brain?

Moving mechanically, her hand on Reginald's arm, she walked across the chancel, and into the small vestry, where Mr. Baynes awaited them, pen in hand, great registers wide open on the table before him; and Alison still felt like a person hovering in some land between dream and reality whilst she took the pen the Vicar gave her, and in the place he indicated, signed her name—Alison Dering. How long it seemed since she had

written that name! Even in this moment of emotion, the thought crossed her mind that it had never been signed by her since the day when she had despatched a hurried note to Mrs. Jennings, the Southampton landlady, and she caught herself vaguely speculating upon what Mrs. Jennings would say to her now, if she suddenly appeared at the lodgings in her new rôle?

"That is all, thank you, Mrs. Metcalfe," Alison was brought back to the exigencies of the present by Mr. Baynes' courteous voice, and she was quite unaware that he wondered why she appeared neither startled nor moved by what he supposed to be her first introduction to her new name. To Alison it had already become so much more familiar to be called Mrs. Metcalfe than Miss Dering, that she had not even observed the clergyman's use of her married title, and Miss Baynes remarked afterwards to her brother—

"I don't think I ever saw a more matter-of-fact bride!"

But any matter-of-factness in Alison was only on the surface; her soul had been stirred to its very depths by the service she had just been through; and though she was quiet and even calm, when, having shaken hands with and thanked Mr. and Mrs. Baynes, she stepped

into the waiting cab, yet her heart was beating tumultuously, and she was conscious of a chaos of strange sensations rioting within her.

She sat a little forward, her face turned away from her companion, looking out of the window, and there was unbroken silence between them until the cab was passing St. Thomas' Hospital and crossing the Westminster Bridge Road. Then Reginald said abruptly, but not unkindly—

"We shall go straight home now—and it is understood, of course, that from this moment you will drop the name of Alison entirely. You will come back to my people —as—Rosamund." His voice dropped over the last word, and Alison, casting a hurried look at his face, saw that his features contracted slightly, as though he could hardly yet bear to utter the name of his dead wife in such a connection. The girl who had taken that dead wife's place leant towards him impulsively.

"Why have you done it?" she cried, "why have you done what we cannot undo again? You have tied me to you for ever, and you hate me."

"Hate is too strong a word," he answered gently, to soothe her vehemence. "We

cannot pretend, can we, to be more than the merest acquaintances, thrown together by an extraordinary chain of circumstances. I don't hate you because — I understand why you acted as you did; I understand, and I forgive. But we cannot pretend to like one another, can we?"

The cab was climbing the steep ascent into Waterloo station, and the clattering of its wheels upon the stones prevented Reginald from hearing Alison's sudden gasp for breath. But she turned and looked at him again, and the passionate appeal in her eyes made him draw in his own breath sharply, whilst some words of the old servant Barbara, forced themselves unbidden into his mind.

"Eh! Master Reggie, I wish every man were as well loved by his wife, as you are loved by yours. Why she loves your very picture that hangs on the wall. What must she feel about you, yourself? Surely she loves the very ground your feet walk upon, Master Reg?"

His own glance turned away from those passionately pleading eyes; he leant out to call a porter, and ask some totally unnecessary question about the time of the train; but all the while Barbara's words rang in his ears, and in his heart—

"She loves your very picture that hangs on the wall. What must she feel about you, yourself?"

He helped Alison to alight, and the newly wedded pair walked silently on to the bustling platform, from which they were informed that in twenty minutes their train would depart. Reginald busied himself in buying stacks of papers and magazines, and Alison stood a few yards from him, idly watching the hurrying passengers, when a man pushed his way through the crowd, and came straight towards her. She recognized him at once, and her cheeks grew white when she saw Stephen Rambert's malignant face smiling down upon her. His dark eyes seemed closer together, and more full of malice than on the occasion of their last meeting. She remembered that dreadful afternoon when Hubert had confronted her with his friend, with this man who had also been Rose Metcalfe's friend; every detail of that afternoon was indelibly impressed upon her memory, and the sight of Rambert's vindictive face awoke memory afresh. With a sick fear and loathing she shrank nearer to Reginald.

Rambert advanced slowly towards her, the malignant smile deepening on his face; in

his eyes a strange wild gleam that frightened the already frightened girl even more than his smile. It so happened that he had never met Reginald, the latter having left Natal when his acquaintance with Rosamund Hensdon began: and he in no way connected the white and shrinking woman before him with the tall bronzed man who stood at the bookstall, absorbedly turning the pages of a volume in his hand. Consistently a bully, he imagined that Alison was alone and at his mercy, and watching her, as a snake watches its fascinated and terrified prey, he came quite close to her side before he spoke.

"Well met, Miss Dering," he said, with a low laugh, whose ring of brutality made Reginald lift his head sharply from his book. "I suppose you are cast on the world again, now that Metcalfe has come home? Bad luck for you his resurrection, eh?"

With a blind instinct of seeking for protection, Alison drew quickly back from the smiling, sinister face so near her own, and clutched at Reginald's arm.

"Don't—let—" she was beginning breathlessly, when Reginald drew her hand through his arm, and turned to Rambert with a look on his face, before which the bully in his turn drew back with a start of dismay.

"Be good enough to leave this lady alone," Reginald said curtly. Her name is not Miss Dering—and——"

Rambert laughed again — the pleasant conviction coming to him that he might be about to enjoy a second opportunity of unmasking a woman's deception, and disclosing unpalatable truths about her.

"My dear sir, I have not the pleasure of your acquaintance," he answered in a low voice, but with a return to the blustering tones he had employed towards Alison, "but if this lady says her name is not Dering, I am ready to swear she is trying to take you in, as she managed to take in some great friends of mine—she——"

"I have not—nor do I wish to have the pleasure of your acquaintance," Reginald broke in, with a quietness of manner which seemed to Alison to hold something deadly, "neither do I propose that your acquaintance with this lady should continue. She was Miss Alison Dering, she is now my wife—Mrs. Reginald Metcalfe."

"*Mrs. — Reginald — Metcalfe!*" Rambert's jaw dropped, the wild gleam in his eyes grew wilder; "then I—then Hubert——," he broke off, as though something were choking him, but the glance he shot in Alison's direc-

tion was so full of baffled hatred and malice, that Reginald's hand instinctively closed over the small hand clinging so desperately to his arm.

"You have not done with me yet, Mrs. Reginald Metcalfe," Rambert hissed out, laying marked emphasis on the three last words. "Who was in the lane with Hubert Metcalfe on the day he was murdered? And who is answerable for his death?"

Before Reginald could reply, or do anything to detain him, but with yet another glance of hatred, Rambert turned quickly away, though not so quickly, but that Reginald moving from Alison's side, pointed out the retreating figure to a policeman a few paces away.

"Why did you do that?" Alison asked, when he returned to her; "he cannot hurt me now. It was only blackmail he wanted—and now—I am safe. I want to forget that man—to lose sight of him."

Reginald looked into her troubled eyes with a smile, that transformed his face, and made it look like the pictured face she had learnt to love.

"I think we will not lose sight of that gentleman," he answered, "presently you shall tell me who he is, and all about him. But

we will not lose sight of the person who knows you were alone in the lane with Hubert on that fatal day—the person who, by showing that he knows that fact, proves that he himself was also there!"

CHAPTER XX

"I—KILLED—HIM!"

"ROSE! my dear, dear Rose—thank God you have come back to me."

Reginald, standing in the doorway of Mrs. Metcalfe's sitting-room, saw how closely his mother's arms were folded about the girl, who had flung herself on her knees beside the invalid's couch; saw, too, how at the first sight of Alison's tall figure, happiness had transfigured his mother's face.

"It is worth while to have played, to go on playing, the grim play out, to see that look on the dear mother's face," he said to himself, as he watched the two, "worth any pain to myself, to see her happy!"

"I have missed you, my darling," the elder woman's voice continued, in soft crooning tones, whilst her hands pushed back a strand of hair from Alison's forehead, and gently stroked the girl's flushed face. "I can never tell you how your father and I have

missed you. I know why you went away. I quite understand how the shock and horror of it all drove you to go away, but oh! thank God you have come back."

Alison winced. In a flash of realization, it came to her that part of the punishment for her sin must be the frequent hearing of such words as these, the constant misinterpretation of her actions by her mother-in-law, misinterpretations which she would never be able to set right.

"We have had such a terrible time, dear," Mrs. Metcalfe's soft voice went on, "and—I am afraid——" she hesitated, and glanced up at her son, who was still standing looking down at the two women, "the inquest, Reg—the adjourned inquest," she added, incoherently.

"Rose," the word came with a touch of hesitation audible to Alison's ears, but unnoticed by the invalid, "Rose understands that she will have to appear at the inquest. I think and hope that her evidence, with some other evidence upon which I have unexpectedly stumbled, may help us to find the right person. I have an idea we are on his track." Mrs. Metcalfe shuddered; she could scarcely bear to recall the tragedy that had happened in their midst—and it was not re-

ferred to again, during those first hours of Alison's return.

The loving reception given both by Mr. and Mrs. Metcalfe to his newly made wife confirmed Reginald's certainty that he had acted rightly in taking the step, which had meant for him so great a sacrifice; and the tenderness shown to his parents by the girl whom he had been regarding as little short of an adventuress touched and moved him. Perhaps, too, the tumultuous welcome bestowed upon Alison by Jock and Tim went further than he knew towards influencing Reginald in the girl's favour: for, being a true dog lover, he was aware, as all friends of the canine race are aware, that no better judge of character exists than a sensible dog.

Mrs. Ralph Metcalfe was the only member of the household who showed no pleasure at Alison's return; who, indeed, on the contrary, seemed to shrink from the girl as if she actually disliked her. Alison received the coldest of greetings from Hubert's mother, when the latter came into the boudoir at tea-time; and the widow's small furtive eyes watched the girl and her husband, with something of the hungry eagerness which a cat bestows upon a mouse. That eager scrutiny embarrassed Alison, and made her already difficult posi-

tion yet more difficult, for, although Reginald was studiously attentive and polite, his wife was acutely conscious of the fact that his behaviour to her was not that of a loving husband recently given back from the dead. And she was acutely conscious, too, that Mrs. Ralph Metcalfe's sharp eyes detected the constraint, that, do what they would, hung over both herself and Reginald.

"I believe the position will be impossible," she thought, when, at six o'clock, she went to her room to dress for dinner, and her thought was emphasized by the first words of old Barbara, who stood awaiting her.

"I couldn't bear you to be still in this room, my dearie, now that Master Reg has come back," the old woman said eagerly, "but he would have it you'd like best to keep the room you've been used to—so I've moved him next door. Dear lamb! this is a happy day for him, and for all of us."

The flush that had mounted to Alison's forehead at Barbara's first words, did not leave her face; there was a suppressed nervousness in her greeting, and in her restless movements when she entered her room, which made the old servant say anxiously—

"You're tired and overdone, my dearie. Poor Master Hubert! That was a shock for

you, and then seeing Master Reg so unexpected was too much—you look fair worn out."

"I—am tired," the girl said wearily, with a sudden feeling that she could bear no more, —that the long day of fatigue and emotion was telling upon her at last; "I am dreadfully tired. So much seems to have happened since I was last in this dear peaceful room."

So much seemed to have happened. The thought persisted in her mind, after Barbara had left her, when she sat in the low chair by the fire, the two adoring terriers cuddled close against her dress, their shaggy heads within reach of her hand. So much *had* happened! First the encounter with Hubert, and its dramatic ending; next the startling, the overwhelming discovery that Reginald Metcalfe was alive, and prepared to expose the fraud of which she had been guilty; then her hurried flight, and the terrible fortnight of strain and anxiety following upon that flight; and lastly, Reginald's visit to her lodging, the hastily arranged wedding, the meeting with Stephen Rambert, and the home-coming to the Hall. The remembrance of all these things flitted across her tired brain, as she lay back in her chair, watching the leaping flames, and caressing Tim and Jock, whose soft bodies edged closer and yet closer to her side, as

though the dogs could not express with sufficient clearness their delight at seeing her again.

So much had happened! So much of terror and dismay, and now she was not only safely back within the sheltering walls of the home she loved, she was also the wife of the man for whom—for whom——

Here her thoughts broke off with singular abruptness, her eyes ceased staring at the fire, and looked across the room to Reginald's photograph above the bureau. The eyes met her own, and it seemed to her that their glance had lost all its old sternness; that it had in it, instead, some of the gentleness which had been there to-day, when Reginald had watched her with his mother. She sat forward suddenly, and clasped her hands; speaking her thoughts aloud, as though they would no longer be restrained within the limits of her mind.

"It is the worst punishment that could have happened to me," she said, "the very worst, the one that will hurt me most. To have to live by his side, to see his eyes look at me, sometimes kindly, sometimes coldly, and to know that I am bound to him by a tie which he hates—hates—hates. No punishment could be harder to bear than that. No punishment in all the world."

* * * * *

Stephen Rambert sat back in the seat allotted to him at the adjourned inquest, and looked round the crowded room with a look in his dark eyes, which made Alison shiver each time she met them. There was amusement in the glance, amusement and malice, and a sinister something which Alison did not know how to interpret correctly. Perhaps it was that sinister look in his eyes, that prevented her from noticing how livid his always sallow face had grown, what deep shadows were graven under his eyes, and how pinched and blue were his nose and lips. When the proceedings actually began, Rambert at first leant back wearily, as though the effort of sitting up were too great for him; and every now and then his brows contracted sharply, and his hands clenched themselves, as if in resistance to a spasm of pain. That agony of pain, that every now and again caught at his chest with the clutch of an iron vice, was no new sensation to him, and ordinarily he gave heed to the warning signified by that iron clutch, and abstained from all excitement or fatigue. But to-day excitement had got the upper hand, he paid scant heed to the warning pain—and excepting that he panted heavily, and that his always sallow face was absolutely livid in colouring—he showed no

outward sign of the suffering he endured. Only he leant a little forward with clenched hands, and the evil light in his eyes glowed and deepened as he turned now and again to glance at Alison, seated between her father-in-law and her husband.

"She thinks she is secure," ran his thoughts, "she thinks she is secure now, but I will be even with her yet. I will be even with her when she thinks she is most safe. My evidence——" His thoughts were abruptly cut in two by another of those sharp intense spasms of pain, which for the moment seemed to Stephen to strike at his very heart and life. Beads of perspiration showed on his pale face, his lips tightened into a straight line of agony; his eyes grew dim with anguish. But the attention of the roomful of people was concentrated too closely upon the witness then giving his evidence, to admit of any being spared for the sallow-faced man who sat with such stiff rigidity, and moved no muscle of his body excepting those tightly clenched hands.

The stout constable now giving his evidence had very little to add to that he had already given on a previous occasion; but a thrill ran round the room when Rosamund Metcalfe's name was called, and Reginald's wife

stood up to tell her story. She was very white, and her voice was almost inaudible, as in reply to the coroner's questions she said that she was the wife of Reginald Metcalfe; and had been residing at the Hall with her parents-in-law, for the past five months. But these preliminaries ended, some of her nervousness seemed to drop from her, and her voice was clear and unfaltering, as she gave her version of the last moments she had spent with the murdered man.

"Am I to understand that he persecuted you with attentions which were unwelcome?" the coroner asked kindly.

"Yes," Alison answered, "he had repeatedly asked me to be his wife—and I had refused him, over and over again."

"You—forgive me for putting the question—you did not care for him sufficiently to accede to his wish?"

"No—oh! no," Alison said quickly.

"Yet you believed your husband to be dead? You believed yourself free to marry again?"

"Yes," Alison replied, her voice suddenly gaining in strength, "but—I loved my husband." There was a proud ring in the words; but as she spoke them she saw Reginald start violently, and the full import

of what she had said rushed over her. The whiteness of her face was dyed crimson, she glanced wildly round the room, with a sudden feeling that she must somehow escape from all these curious eyes; then the sound of the coroner's voice, calm, quiet, matter-of-fact, restored her self-control.

"I quite understand you, Mrs. Metcalfe. Now will you tell us a little more about Mr. Hubert Metcalfe's persecution of you. Tell us, as far as you can, what form it took?"

Alison's voice was very low and hesitating, but she answered this question quietly, putting into words, as well as she was able, all that she had endured from Hubert. It was not an easy story to tell, and she told it falteringly, with many hesitations, but the coroner was a kindly man, and helped her by tactful questions, and gentle words of encouragement. Perhaps, because he had daughters of his own, he felt sorry for the white-faced girl, whose eyes held an expression of such troubled bewilderment, whose voice quivered so pitifully over the tale she had to tell, and he dealt with her very mercifully. When she had finished the story of Hubert's persistent persecution, there was a little pause, and the coroner's next question was asked very gravely and slowly.

"Will you tell me now, Mrs. Metcalfe, exactly what occurred, when you and Mr. Hubert Metcalfe were together on the day of his death?"

Alison's glance instinctively travelled across the room, to the place where Stephen Rambert sat in a curiously hunched-up position, his white face supported by his hands, his gleaming eyes fixed on her face. The look of malice that flashed from him to her, gave her a sudden certainty that to him, and to him alone, did the police owe the knowledge of her presence on the moor with Hubert on that fateful afternoon—and another long pause followed the coroner's last question, whilst her confused brains tried to puzzle out the solution of a problem suddenly thrust before them, even though it was not the first time the problem had occurred to her. What had Stephen been doing on the moors that day? Why was he there? What had been his object in coming there?

These questions passed through her mind in a lightning flash of wonder, and the coroner was obliged to repeat his question, before, with a start, she roused herself to reply to it. In a hush so intense that the listening crowd hardly seemed even to breathe, Alison told the story of her walk up the lane to the

moorland above; of Hubert's pursuit; of his impassioned words to her, and—finally of the mad embrace, from which she had extricated herself by pushing her assailant down.

"And—" she ended, speaking in a trembling whisper, "directly I had pushed him away from me, I ran down the lane as fast as I could run. I was so afraid he would follow me. I——"

"Will you try to explain why you left Minley?" the coroner asked, "why did you hide yourself?"

"I was—afraid," she whispered, her eyes turning first to Stephen Rambert, then to her husband, "afraid——" Her voice died down into silence, her eyes remained helplessly fixed upon Reginald; she realized, more acutely than even before, how tightly she was caught and held in the meshes of her own deceit. She dared not explain the true reason of her fear; she could neither say, "I ran away because the man whose widow I was impersonating, came home again," nor could she pretend that she had tried to escape from any possible results of her treatment of Hubert. Until she had heard the tidings of Hubert's death from Reginald's lips, no thought of such a catastrophe had crossed her mind. Her hurried flight from Minley

had not been in any sense a flight from the law. And now she was called upon to explain that flight—to——

The coroner's voice, grave, yet still kindly, interrupted the thoughts that had been hurrying pall-mall through her brain.

"You were afraid that Mr. Hubert Metcalfe was seriously injured by the fall, and you could not face the consequences? That is so, is it not?"

Alison's face grew haggard, and almost old, in that moment of tension.

"I—" she began, then paused and began again, "I—could not face the consequences," she ended breathlessly, catching at the coroner's words and repeating them with a sudden instinct that they were her only salvation; and that they were at least true, if only partially the truth. But as she spoke, Stephen Rambert's eyes seemed to draw her glance towards them, and the cruel smile on his ghastly pain-drawn face, made her draw back suddenly as if she had received a blow. To the remainder of the questions put to her, she gave mechanical answers, whilst to and fro, backwards and forwards in her mind, surged the overmastering speculation—

"What is that man going to say when his

turn comes to be questioned? What deadly harm will he do me if he only can?"

Her examination ended, she sat down with a long sigh, that was rather the sigh of despair than of relief, a despair engendered by the conviction that Stephen Rambert intended to do her all the mischief that lay in his power. And there was so much—so terribly much that lay in his power to do!

She heard no word of the evidence that immediately followed her own; her eyes refused to watch any face but the drawn white face of the man opposite to her; her brain refused to admit any other consideration but the thought of what he would say when his turn came to speak. She had lost all conception of time; she could not have said whether hours or minutes had crept by since her own voice had ceased to answer the apparently endless questions put to her. She felt as if she did not know whether days or weeks or months even had drifted by in that crowded room, when, at last—at last Stephen Rambert's name was called.

He rose slowly from the curiously huddled position in which he had been sitting, and it was obvious that movement was for some reason either difficult or painful to him; and, having risen, he did not stand upright, but

remained in a stooping attitude, leaning heavily on the back of a chair beside him. His answers to the preliminary questions put to him were given in so low a tone that the coroner was frequently obliged to request him to speak with greater distinctness; and there were frequent and long pauses between his words, when he appeared to draw his breath with difficulty. It was only when the coroner said slowly, "Will you now tell us all that you saw at the top of Milsom Lane, on the day of Mr. Hubert Metcalfe's death?" that a tinge of colour crept over the ghastliness of his face, and he dragged himself into a more upright position.

"Yes," he said, his voice grown all at once clear and loud, his breathing no longer gasping and hampered, "I can tell you the whole truth—because I was in the lane when Metcalfe—when Metcalfe——" The spurious strength which had rung in his voice when he began to speak died out of it as suddenly as it had come; he swayed a little, one of his hands clutched at his chest with a frantic agonized clutch, and the agony of mortal pain looked out of his eyes.

"I—" he gasped, his face growing every moment more ashen, beads of perspiration showing on his forehead, "I—this—is—death

—and—I——" he swayed further forward, and two men in the crowd rushed to his support. He leant heavily against them, his hand still clutching at his chest; his breathing coming in slow agonized gasps, his eyes closed. The coroner rose, he had opened his mouth to speak, when Rambert's eyes opened and he stretched out his free hand.

"Dying," he panted out, "I—can't die—until—until——" With superhuman strength he pulled himself from the arms that held him, and looking straight across the room towards Alison, said faintly, but distinctly, "I—killed—Hubert Metcalfe—we—quarrelled. I—killed—him—dagger—my—room—I—the pain—my—God!"

His voice rose into a cry of such awful anguish, that the listeners shuddered, and as its echoes died away, Stephen Rambert sank down into his chair, a crumpled heap of humanity, his face stamped with the stamp of death, his last breaths coming with slow anguished efforts from between his grey parted lips.

CHAPTER XXI

"ON ONE CONDITION!"

AFTER she had recovered from the first overwhelming shock and horror of Stephen Rambert's sudden death, Alison realized with a counter-shock of acute relief that the one great danger in her path had been removed. Rambert, and Rambert only, could have told the truth regarding her deception; with Rambert's death, all danger was ended, for the possibility of any further meeting with her Southampton landlady, Mrs. Jennings, was too remote to be considered. Her secret now lay solely in her own keeping, and in the keeping of the man who had given her his name; and when she remembered this, Alison was almost passionately grateful. And, strangely enough, the fact that Rambert's confession had exonerated her from all possible blame for Hubert's death affected her far less than did the certainty that no one now shared her secret, save her husband himself. This

thought was one of supreme comfort to her in the many days of embarrassment that followed her home-coming and the adjourned inquest. For there was embarrassment enough and to spare, in the constant intercourse with a man who was her husband, yet not her husband; whose treatment of her, though very gentle and courteous, never approached to friendliness, much less to intimacy; whose presence was a constant reminder to her of the fraud she had practised, and of the little fair-haired girl, who lay sleeping in a Southampton cemetery. Once, and once only, had Reginald referred to the secret knowledge they shared, and this was on the day immediately after the inquest, as they were walking back to the Hall together.

"You played the part you were meant to play superbly," Reginald said, a faintly sarcastic inflection in his voice.

"Played—the—part? I don't—understand." Alison's steps paused a moment, she looked into her companion's face with puzzled eyes.

"Yes," he persisted, "I quite grant that for the sake of my father and mother, we must keep up the farce of being husband and wife—and you certainly played your part in the farce with a vengeance to-day."

Alison's glance was still one of bewilderment.

"I don't know what you mean," she said slowly. "I told the truth about—about that dreadful day on the moor. I did not exaggerate, or leave out anything. I think I told the simple truth all through."

"As to that question—yes—I have no doubt you did tell the simple truth, neither more nor less. But—I repeat—your acting was superb, when you told the court that you loved your husband. You must let me congratulate you on that really magnificent display of histrionic art."

"But—there was no art about it," she exclaimed. "I meant——" She broke off her sentence abruptly, and a flood of crimson poured over her face, as she suddenly realized what her words implied, and caught the expression of profound amazement upon Reginald's face. She was supremely thankful that at the moment of her impulsive speech they were turning out of the lane and into the drive, where the overarching trees threw deep shadows, and she knew that her burning blushes were not so visible as in the brilliant sunshine of the high road. But a most embarrassing silence followed her broken sentence, a silence, during which she was un-

pleasantly conscious that Reginald's eyes were frequently fixed upon her, a silence broken by him at last, with the apparently irrelevant remark—

"I am glad to see that my dogs have made friends with you." Alison's heart gave a leap of relief, and she plunged into an eager conversation about dogs in general, and Tim and Jock in particular, feeling intensely grateful to Reginald for changing the subject with such commendable promptitude. Yet in the quietness of her own room, with her husband's face looking gravely down upon her from the wall, her cheeks grew hot again, as she remembered what she had implied, and more than implied, in that impulsive broken sentence—and she covered her burning face with her hands, in the vain effort to shut out from her eyes the sight of Reginald's expression of profound amazement, when her words reached his ears.

In his mother's boudoir, meanwhile, Reginald was giving to Mrs. Metcalfe a disjointed, and not altogether coherent, account of the inquest, and its tragic conclusion; whilst those quickly spoken, and quickly interrupted words of his wife rang in his ears with an odd, almost irritating persistence.

"But there was no art about it. I meant——"

What had she meant? What had she been going to say, when she broke off her sentence in such overwhelming embarrassment, that the crimson flowed over her white face from neck to brow? What had her words implied?

"There was no art about it. I meant——"

"She could not really have meant what her words most obviously appeared to mean, —that she had spoken truth at the inquest, that she was not acting at all! She could not mean, it was impossible that she could mean, anything so out of the question, so absurd as that." Reginald moved restlessly about the boudoir, answering Mrs. Metcalfe's questions mechanically, and occasionally at random, whilst his brain repeated, and repeated yet again, the strange words spoken by Alison; and he found himself wondering (though he was half ashamed of the wonder) whether the tall girl with the grey eyes and the startled flushed face, could really—really mean—that she cared——

He thrust the thought from him, his own face flushing darkly. He sat down close to his mother's couch and forced himself to think of what she was asking him, and of the tragic occurrences of less than an hour before. But his efforts were not wholly attend-

ed with success, for, although he talked on of Stephen Rambert, of the dead man's confession, of the startling sequel to Hubert's murder, Alison's words still rang backwards and forwards in his mind.

"But it was not art. I meant——" and again and again before his mind's eye there rose that picture of Alison's face, flushed and troubled—with the look of sudden startled consciousness in her deep grey eyes.

The husband and wife did not meet again until dinner-time, and then the presence of their elders saved them from what both instinctively felt must have been a moment of discomfort; but in the days that came after, there were many moments of embarrassment so acute, that Alison often felt the position she held was both untenable and intolerable. Her own sense of the difficulty, nay the impossibility, of the position, was emphasized by her discovery that Mrs. Metcalfe was beginning to observe and wonder over the mutual attitude of the young husband and wife. The elder woman was far too discreet to interfere between them; but Alison's own eyes being quickened by all the strange circumstances, she was fully aware that her mother-in-law was watching both her and Reginald, with loving anxiety.

Mr. Metcalfe's suspicions that all was not as it should be between the young couple were also roused, and with the realization that she was being continually watched by kindly, anxious eyes, there came to Alison an overpowering sensation that she was trapped and imprisoned, with no means of escape.

During every day of those slowly dragging months it became harder to live in the same house with Reginald, to see his face, to hear his voice—and yet to feel herself as far from him as if he had been at the Antipodes. Nay, she felt as though he were set farther away from her now, than if his actual bodily presence were removed; for his distant politeness chilled her till she could have cried aloud for very misery; whilst the bitter knowledge that she loved this man who was her husband, yet a stranger to her, made her heart ache almost to breaking-point.

In as far as was compatible with the play they were playing out, the husband and wife avoided one another; Alison spending more and more time with her mother-in-law, Reginald busying himself about the estate. But occasionally the young couple found themselves forced to take a walk together, or to sit together in the sitting-room especially assigned to them; and it was then that

Alison's discomfort and despair reached their fullest height. It was on one of these occasions that her fortitude at last broke down.

It was an afternoon in March, and she and Reginald and their faithful companions, the two terriers, were returning from the village, whither they had been despatched on an errand by Mrs. Metcalfe. It so chanced that their way took them past the cross-roads where Reginald had first seen her, and as they passed the place, Alison shivered, and looking up the steep lane, said under her breath—

"That day was like a horrible nightmare, and I don't feel as if I had ever awoke out of it since."

"You are not unhappy now?" Reginald looked at her sharply. "Things are quite smooth for you, aren't they? You are not unhappy now?"

"I don't know how to *bear* it," she exclaimed passionately, stopping in the middle of the road, to the discomfiture of Jock and Tim. "How can such a position as—as—mine be happy?"

"I—thought," he began, but she interrupted him quickly.

"You thought it would be all right for me if I just stayed on here, deceiving the dear old people—keeping the home they

had given me, living here as their daughter. Perhaps I thought so, too. I don't know. I don't know what I thought, what I fancied, when I agreed to marry you. I only know that I am miserable, utterly, utterly miserable, and that I cannot bear it any more!"

Her voice quivered, the shaky accents appealed to all that was most chivalrous in Reginald.

"I am sorry," he said gently, "more sorry than I can say. I know the position is hard—hard for us both. I feel it too, but I hoped that you——"

"You hoped I did not mind," she broke in with a sad little laugh; "I daresay you thought that a girl who could sell her honour, as I sold mine, when I first came here, would not mind any drawbacks, as long as she just had a comfortable home. But—somehow—the whole thing has become impossible!"

She looked round her wildly, her glance falling anywhere but on her husband's perturbed face.

"You see they guess, your father and mother guess, that something is wrong. You—we—don't behave as they expected us to behave; they watch us, and their faces get graver—and—and—I know it hurts them. And I—I cannot bear the strain any more."

She shrank a little away from him as she spoke, but though he could not see her face, his ears caught the sound of a stifled sob; and with the quick instinct of sympathy that was innate in him, he put his hand on her shoulder.

"Don't cry," he said. "I wish I could see a way out of the tangle for us, but——"

"But it is all my fault," she sobbed—she was physically and mentally overtired, and the strain of the past few weeks had told upon her—"I am being punished now for my sin—punished—as I deserve."

She drew herself away as she spoke, from the pressure of his hand; its touch sent such thrills of happiness through her every vein, that she dared not let his hand rest upon her shoulder, lest she should be overmastered by her intense longing to fling herself into his arms, and sob out all her love and misery upon his breast.

"I deserve it all," she went on hurriedly, drawing further away from him; "but just for a little while, I believe I had better go away. I don't think I can bear it if I stay here. If I could go away for a little time, perhaps I should come back more—more sensible; I cannot bear it now."

"But where would you go?" Reginald

asked, his practical, masculine mind viewing the matter from a common-sense standpoint. "Wouldn't my father and mother be surprised, if you went off by yourself?"

"I can't help it," she said wearily; "I must go. To stay here will drive me mad. I have made my own misery, I know that; and I know I have got to face the consequences. But—let me go away for a little while. Please, Reginald, let me go!"

Her eyes, swimming with tears, looked pleadingly up into his face; something in their pleading, something that lay behind the pleading, stirred the young man's pulses. Those words of hers, spoken after the inquest recurred to him with sudden force.

"It was not art. I meant——"

His heart beat fast; her very intonation of his name quickened its beat.

"You shall go, if you wish it," he said, and some new note of tenderness in his accents arrested Alison's attention; "only tell me, where can you go?"

"I should like to go to London again. Perhaps in all the din and bustle and stir of life, I could forget——"

"Forget what?" He came closer to her, and that tender inflection was still in his voice. "What is it you want to forget?"

The colour came and went in her face in swift, soft flushes; the softness of his voice, the dangerous new softness, thrilled through her pulses, and made her heart beat to suffocation.

"I want to forget I have been a fool," she answered, "to forget all the mistakes, and worse than mistakes, that I have made—and to begin again."

"Why have you been a fool?" he persisted. His eyes were still fixed on her face. He found it pleasant to watch that swift coming colour, and the sweep of the downcast lashes on the flushed cheek; he noticed, not for the first time, how delicate and lovely was the outline of her face, how exquisitely curved were her lips.

Her lips? It might conceivably be more than pleasant to—— His own face flushed.

"Why have you been a fool?" he asked huskily. He was so near her now, that his arm brushed against hers.

"Because—because—" Her voice wavered and fell into silence, a silence which she broke suddenly and vehemently. "Please let me go," she cried, "I—I feel—as if I had lost myself. I want to find myself again. I want to get back my balance. I want——"

"You shall go—on one condition." Regi-

nald's voice was very quiet, but the new ring in it was still plainly audible, and it was very masterful.

"On one condition," he repeated.

"And the condition?" For a second she lifted her eyes to his face, dropping them again quickly, as her glance encountered his.

"The condition is—that you come back—soon," he whispered, and his hand went out and closed over hers.


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CHAPTER XXII

"PARADISE ITSELF!"

REGENT'S PARK on an April afternoon may not be as inspiriting a place as the countryside at the same season. Nevertheless it has a charm of its own; and after all, a place becomes inspiriting or the reverse, according to the point of view from which it is seen by the human being within it. To this day, Alison Metcalfe has a fixed idea that Paradise and Regent's Park have a close affinity with one another: but then she saw the park under circumstances which may be said fully to have justified her in that idea. She had been a month in comfortable lodgings in London, a month during which she had spent a considerable amount of time in walking briskly about the streets and parks, trying, as she said, to restore the balance of her mind, and to find herself again. The old people had willingly agreed to let her come away,

when it was pointed out to them by Reginald that his wife needed a change, and that she proposed going to London for a time, to shake off the effects of all she had undergone at the time of Hubert's death and afterwards.

"She will be better alone," Reginald said to his mother, when that lady hoped that her son would accompany his wife. "She has been a good deal hipped by all this wretched business; my turning up again was a shock; Hubert's death was a terrible business, and altogether her nerves are a bit out of sorts—she will be better alone."

"And you don't think she will gradually, and in time, recover here?" his mother asked. "I have noticed, of course, I have not failed to notice, that the dear child has not been herself for months, in fact not since poor Hubert's death. But I had hoped that—with your care and ours—things would right themselves again." Mrs. Metcalfe's eyes searched her son's face wistfully, but Reg was on his guard, and neither by the flicker of an eyelid, nor the movement of a muscle, did he show that he understood the reason of his mother's wistful bewilderment.

"I have no doubt everything will come right," he answered firmly. "She—Rose—is not quite herself—and, as you say, she has

not been herself for a long time ; and I have quite come to the conclusion that she is wise in wishing to go away alone. That is why I am putting no difficulties in her way, and I know you will not put any either."

After this conversation, no objection had been made to Alison's plans ; and for a month now she had been in London, dividing her time between reading a great stock of books of every description, and taking long walks in every part of the Metropolis. Without doubt she was benefiting by the change, but with the sweet April weather, a sense of home sickness was daily growing upon her ; and with the home sickness was a yearning, sometimes almost unbearable, to see her husband's face, and to hear his voice again.

"You fool—you poor silly fool," she whispered to herself, as she walked slowly along a secluded path in Regent's Park, one sunshiny afternoon. "What is the use of letting yourself think about a person who must hate the very sight of you, and the very sound of your name ? Understand once for all, that he can never be anything more to you than a kindly friend—take hold of your life, and make the best you can of it. Don't be a fool and a coward."

As she spoke, she moved across the path-

way, and leaning against the railings, looked across a strip of short grass, to the shining reach of water beyond. The sun poured down upon the rippling wavelets, making the lake a veritable sheet of silver, in a setting of vivid green. The fresh green of spring-time was on the grass; the bushes that bent towards the water's edge were veiled in a cloud of delicate green; the elms showed a soft green tracery against the background of pale April sky. The birds that swam to and fro upon the gleaming water, quacked and cackled and chuckled their appreciation of spring in every variety of voice; in the shrubberies, there were thrushes singing out of the gladness of their hearts to the April sunshine; the cheepings and chatterings of the very sparrows held notes of spontaneous gaiety. Upon the grassy slopes narcissus, orange and white, bent graceful heads to the April breeze; their fragrance mounted to Alison's brains, and set her pulses throbbing. All the pent-up longings within her seemed to find voice and meaning, in the sounds and scents of the spring afternoon—a little sob climbed into her throat, and her eyes grew misty with tears.

"It is my own fault," she whispered; "every bit of it is my own fault. I am

being punished a thousandfold for what I did, —and the punishment is—almost more than I can bear. But—I will bear it—I will—I will," she repeated emphatically ; and saying the words, her hands grasped the hard iron of the fence, as though she were calling upon it to witness the promise she was making to herself.

"I will," she said, for the third time, and then she drew herself into an upright position, and looked out again across the swinging narcissus flowers to the sunlit waters, with a sudden wish that the sun would not shine so brightly, and that the soft breezes were not so fragrantly laden with the sweetness of spring, and of all that spring means. She was turning away, resolved to return to her lodgings, and to finish a task of reading she had set herself that morning, when a hand laid on her shoulder made her start and turn quickly, with an indignant exclamation, to find herself face to face with her own husband. For a moment, sheer amazement held her dumb, then she faltered out breathlessly the first words that came into her head—

"How did you know I was here ?"

"Come and sit down, and I will tell you about it," was Reginald's answer, and Alison's heart-beats quickened, as she recognized in

his voice that new note of tenderness which had rung in it once before. "I—have a great deal to say to you."

"Have you?" she said, still speaking breathlessly, feeling that her words were utterly futile and inadequate. "I—I can't imagine how you ever found me, here, in this big park."

"Come and sit down," he said again, and Alison realized that all this time his hand had never left her shoulder; and that whilst he was speaking, he was urging her gently towards a seat, under one of the budding elms.

"It is quiet here," he went on in satisfied tones, when they were seated side by side, "quiet—and—just right for what I want to say."

"Just right for what you want to say?" Alison found herself repeating his words, wondering as she did so, why she yielded to such imbecility; why her heart beat till she thought Reg must hear it; why he never removed his eyes from her face—why——

"Yes—exactly right for what I want to say," he answered, "but why have you got tears in your eyes?" he ended suddenly, and with apparent irrelevance.

"Tears?" Alison turned her face towards him, and tried to smile, but the attempt

was not altogether successful, and her lips quivered.

"I—I think perhaps I wasn't very happy just now," she said, shakily, "and I——"

"Not happy?" Reginald's voice dropped, and the girl by his side quivered at the caressing note in it. "Why were you not happy? Tell me all about it."

He was very near her now, so near, that she realized he was breathing quickly himself — so near, that again she wondered whether he could hear the thundering beats of her heart; so near, that all at once his hand covered hers, and drew it into a close, close clasp.

"Are you unhappy now?" he whispered, his face bent down to her face, the pressure of his hand tightening, as she gave the scarcely audible reply—

"No—not now."

"I want you to come home," he said, after a pause, a pause in which floods of sunshine from the sunlit world seemed to pour into Alison's heart. "I want you to come home—with me—my wife!"

"I can't understand," Alison said shakily, whilst a pigeon strutted solemnly along the deserted pathway, its head turned towards the man and woman on the seat; its red-

gleaming eyes staring at them. "I can't in the least understand."

There was no living being in sight, excepting the strutting pigeon, and his following of small impudent sparrows, and Reginald's arm went round his wife, and drew her close against him.

"I think I can make you understand," he answered, and when she lifted her face towards him, he bent over her, and kissed her on the lips. "Do you understand now?" he whispered, his arm loosening its hold of her, though his eyes still rested smilingly on her flushed, and downcast face. "Do you understand?" he persisted, when she did not answer.

"I don't know — I don't think you ought——"

"Ought I not?" His arm went round her again, with a masterful pressure, there was a masterful ring in his voice. "But you are my wife, sweetheart, and I may kiss you whenever I choose."

"But not here—not in Regent's Park," Alison exclaimed, with a little shaky laugh, freeing herself from his arm, and drawing away from him, "if this *is* Regent's Park," she added, "and not Paradise—Paradise itself!" Again she laughed, a laugh that,

despite its quavering quality, was so full of joy, that Reginald drew her back to his side once more.

"Was it Paradise—just now—before I came?" he said; and with another laugh of pure delight, she answered softly—

"No—no, oh! no; but you have given me the key!"

"Only I still cannot understand about it all," she said presently, when they were able to talk more quietly and rationally, "when did you leave off hating me? When did you forgive me for—for everything? Why——"

"I don't think I ever hated you," he interrupted her. "I was angry, I was terribly angry at first; then I was sorry for you. I began to understand it all. I saw how everything had happened, and as soon as I understood, I forgave. And then——"

"Then," she put in, when he paused.

"Then I saw how loving and tender you were to the old people; I learnt to know you,—yourself; I saw the difficulty of your position—I began to admire your pluck, and—when you came away, the house felt a blank without you!"

"Did you miss me?" she asked, incredulously.

"Miss you? It was horrible after you had

gone. But I made up my mind I would give myself a month—a clear month, to see whether I could bear to be without you or no; and I find I cannot bear it; I cannot bear it for another day. I want you to come home with me, my wife—and you must never go away again."

The pigeon had long ago departed, and the chattering sparrows had flown away, before Reginald and Alison rose from their seat, and slowly wandered along the water side in the direction of Alison's temporary abode; and the streets were golden with the light of sunset by the time they stood in her small sitting-room.

"We will go home by an evening train," Reginald said quietly. "You shall give me dinner here, and we will take an evening train—home—my wife—my wife," and once again Alison was gathered into his arms, and his kisses rained upon her face.

* * * * *

The elder Mr. and Mrs. Metcalfe were immensely surprised and impressed by the wonderful effect upon their daughter-in-law of her month's sojourn in London.

"She is like a new creature," they said to one another, "and she and Reg seem to be inseparable. No doubt the shock of his

sudden home-coming, and of Hubert's dreadful death, did upset dear Rose. She is not the same person now, and she and Reg are like newly-married lovers. It is very delightful, and very wonderful."

One other thing the observant old people noticed, and this was, that after their return from London, Reginald rarely, if ever, called his wife by her Christian name. The word "Rose" never seemed to cross his lips when he spoke to her; endearing names he had for her in plenty, her own name he never used.

"And yet it cannot be that he does not love the name," Mrs. Metcalfe said to her husband, a year later, when they stood beside their granddaughter's cradle, "for when I asked Reg what the dear baby was to be called, he answered at once—

"'Why she must be called Rose. The wife and I both want her to be called Rose—Rose Alison.' So you see, dear, he is really fond of the name."

Oh! yes, he was really fond of the name, as he had been fond of the little fair-haired girl who had borne it—the little girl who lay at rest in the Southampton cemetery; but his love for Alison grew and deepened into something very different from his love for the child-wife of other days. He and Alison

made a pilgrimage together to that grave in its quiet corner, and Reginald looked at his wife with loving gratitude, when he read the words on the white marble cross which she had erected to Rose's memory. They were very simple, very short.

"ROSE METCALFE,
DIED APRIL 2, 18—,
AGED 18 YEARS."

"FOR OF SUCH IS THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN."

"My poor little girl," he said gently, "my poor little Rose; those are the right words to have put for her; she was as sweet and simple as a child!"

"Does she forgive?" Alison whispered, her hand held fast in her husband's hand. "Does she forgive and understand?"

"She forgives, because she understands," he answered gently. "I like to think that, if she can see us now, she is glad because of our gladness, happy in our joy."

On their way back from the cemetery to the station, that afternoon, they were met by Alison's former landlady, Mrs. Jennings, who made as though she would pass Alison, without recognition, being in fact mindful of a certain occasion when Alison had obviously cut her in Regent Street. But Alison frus-

trated the good lady's intention, by extending a hand to her, and saying cordially—

"How do you do, Mrs. Jennings? You remember me, don't you? I lodged with you once for some weeks, when I was Alison Dering."

The warmth of the greeting melted Mrs. Jennings' wrath, a smile replaced her frozen expression of countenance, she wrung Alison's hand heartily.

"Well, I'm sure I'm pleased to see you again, miss—or perhaps I should say ma'am," she said, making up her mind on the instant, that she would ignore their previous meeting in Regent Street. "May be you are not Miss Dering any more."

"No—Mrs. Jennings, I am not Miss Dering any more," Alison answered, laughing pleasantly. "This is my husband," — Mrs. Jennings bowed affably to Reginald—"we came down here for an hour or two on business. I am glad I happened to meet you, for I should not have had time to go to your house."

"Most nice and pleasant she was, and all," Mrs. Jennings explained to her husband afterwards, "so nice, that, would you believe it, I let her go off, without ever so much as asking her new name."

"I thought I had better not mention your name," Alison was saying to Reginald, almost at the same instant, whilst they were being whirled homewards in the train; "she might have asked awkward questions, and complications might have arisen. As it is, I am never likely to see her again."

"Never again I should think and hope," Reginald answered, drawing his wife into his arms. "I do not want you to be reminded of your old days of misery and want. You have begun a new life now with me, my sweet, and I mean that life to be a happy one. You must forget all that was sad in your past, and remember only that you are happy now—that we are happy together."

And Alison, looking out at the soft summer landscape, from the safe shelter of her husband's arms, felt that the past was past indeed, —and that she was content.

Butler & Tanner, The Selwood Printing Works, Frome, and London.

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